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# Change of pace and other stories

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Change of pace and other stories

by

Brian J. Wendry

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
**MASTER OF ARTS**

Department: English  
Major: English (Creative Writing)  
Major Professor: Joseph Geha

Iowa State University  
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Graduate College  
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of  
Brian J. Wendry  
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHANGE OF PACE	1
LUNCH AT MILARDO'S	16
NIGHT AND DAY	30
IN THE BARBER'S CHAIR	46
DIRT AND DUST	57
SOONER OR LATER, EVERYONE NEEDS HARDWARE	83

## CHANGE OF PACE

Jack opened the door to us, wearing a tuxedo and mirrored sunglasses.

"Looking good," I told him. Darlene marched ahead of me into the efficiency unit that Jack and Emily had rented for the week. They'd come to this place called the Ocean Resort Motel. It was on the ocean all right, but it wasn't any resort.

"Let me guess, you got married today?" Darlene said to Jack, knowing full well that that wasn't the case. Darlene wasn't a big fan of Jack's.

"No, but we are accepting gifts," he said.

"Gifts my ass," Darlene said.

Emily was at the kitchen table, looking down at the tomatoes she was preparing for the salad. It wasn't going so good. She pushed a butter knife across the tomato and barely left a dent. Pressing harder, she forced the knife through the tomato, squirting pulp and tomato guts over the white table-top.

"Good God Emily, don't you have a real knife?" Darlene asked.

"A real knife?" Emily said, looking up from her work. "No, I don't have a real knife. But Jack's got his rented tux and that's what's important. A tuxedo to wear at breakfast and on the beach and in bed." Emily threw her

knife down. She wiped the tomato parts off the table and dumped them into the plastic bowl.

Darlene placed our contribution--a pie and two six packs of beer--on the counter. She rubbed Emily's shoulder and turned to Jack, "All right, what's with the get-up?"

"A reception in Gotham. Would you care to accompany me?" He reached out and lifted Darlene's hand. I thought he was going to kiss it but she yanked it away.

"He's been talking that way all week too," Emily said. "He watched some Batman marathon on channel 38 the other night and hasn't let up since."

"Reliving our childhood, are we?" Darlene said and folded her arms across her chest.

Jack didn't answer. He took a half-empty bottle of Bacardi off the top of the refrigerator and went out on the porch. I watched Emily clean the table with a sponge. She was a woman worth watching. If you saw her in the stands at the ballpark you'd spend more time looking at her than the game.

"Whenever you're finished Charlie, me and Em could use a moment," Darlene said, arching her left eyebrow at me.

"Sure," I said, and left them alone. Darlene always did that thing with her eyebrow when she caught me staring at Emily. A lot of women would have done something more, would have said something, if they caught their boyfriend checking out another woman. But not Darlene. She wasn't the possessive type. She waitressed nights at the Red Dog Saloon--made good money too, bikers are big tippers--and we'd go days hardly seeing each other. It worked out pretty good though, both of us had our own space but we still had each other to fill up the space leftover.

Jack stood with his back to me, looking out at the ocean. A warm grill sat in the corner with the top down and you could smell the chicken fat burning on the coals. There was a porch on top of us and a porch below us but the porches to the sides were blocked by partitions. Down on the beach a couple of younger guys were putting away a volleyball net and behind them on the horizon the sun had nearly sunk completely into the Atlantic. About fifty yards south the beach turned to rocks, empty cans and grass covered dunes. Rust colored slat fencing rode over the humps of the dunes.

"How's the vacation going?" I said.

"It's going."

I took a seat in a plastic deck chair. "And things with Emily?"

"You know women."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." And what he meant was--things weren't going so good. That was obvious, but not unusual. Emily was a bit of a basketcase, a trade-off, I suppose, a guy had to make to get a looker like her. Still, she seemed to be especially out of sorts today.

"Anything in particular?"

"Look Charlie, I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay, okay." There were a hundred and one things that could have been going on between Jack and Emily. They could have been arguing about who put the toilet paper in upside down or Emily might have been pregnant, it didn't matter which, the arguments would run their course and end just the same.

"What's the occasion for the tux?" Now there was something unusual.

No occasion." Jack sipped from the Bacardi Reserve and then handed it to me.

"It's a sharp outfit." I took a drink from the bottle and returned it. "That's good, must have set you back a bit."

"Not too much." He lifted the top of the grill and peaked inside. It was a good sized bird, and looked nearly done.

I took my pipe and my bag out and filled the bowl. There wasn't much dope left since it was Saturday. It had been a hot week and I smoked at work to help me concentrate. Roofing gets pretty boring sometimes. Fortunately, Jack didn't care for dope so I wouldn't have to share it with him.

Darlene and Emily whispered in the kitchen. They were going out of their way to keep their voices down but it didn't take a telephone psychic to figure out what they were saying. Darlene would be telling Emily to do this and that because Jack had done this or that. Darlene would never have put up with Jack's shit.

I knew him from high school. We weren't close friends but we hung out with the same crowd. Jack became a local celebrity after chugging a half pint of grain alcohol on a dare. He didn't throw up the next morning, but he was drunk for two days and his ass hurt so much he couldn't sit down. He figured his butt had absorbed all the booze since that was the only place he had any fat in those days. After high school I lost track of him for a while, heard he had gone to college. Then one day he started working where I worked, at Peterson Roofing.

Jack placed the bottle on the floor and stood with his back against the porch railing, drumming the fingers of his right hand on his leg. Although the sun was gone the humidity still blurred the sky. I watched the sweat pile up in the corners of his temple. Every few seconds a long drop of sweat broke from one of the piles and streaked down the side of his face.



"Jesus Jack, aren't you hot in that thing?"

"No, not really."

I watched an old guy with a metal detector make his way slowly down the beach.

"You should have seen Dave yesterday," I said.

Oh yeah, what'd he do this time?" Jack reached up and grabbed the bottom of the porch on top of us and kind of hung there, stretching.

"The dumb son of a bitch put a nail in his leg. We were working on that eight/twelve roof on 14th street and he was laying shingles while he walked it, wouldn't wait for the toe-boards. You know how he gets."

Jack nodded. "No sense rushing, especially when you're getting paid by the hour." He pulled himself off the porch slowly, doing a pull-up, until his chin was even with the floor on top of us. He paused there for a moment and then let himself down again. He continued with the pull-ups.

"That's what I told him. Told him, 'what's your hurry, we're getting paid by the hour.' But he didn't listen, never does. Anyway, he slipped and shot a nail into his thigh. He was hollering so bad I thought he fell off the roof or something."

Jack finished with the pull-ups. "I used to be able to do fifteen in high school," he said. He must have done eight or nine just then.

"Fifteen? That's something." I tapped my pipe on the arm of the chair, clearing out the ashes. "So anyway, I pulled it out with a claw hammer, but the burrs were dug in pretty good and prying against a flabby leg isn't like prying against plywood. It took some work to get that nail out. Not like that time I shot that spike through the crook of my thumb. That was easy. Just

snipped off the head and pulled it out with pliers. With Dave though, it was a regular fucking production."

Jack grabbed hold of the porch above us again. "Work work work, it gets to wearing on a guy," he said.

"Yeah, but things could be worse. At least we don't do any asbestos tear-offs. I couldn't stand wearing that space-suit all day." I put the pipe back in my shirt pocket.

"If we had any sense we'd rob a bank and retire to Bermuda," Jack said, "leave all the other suckers to bust their humps all day."

"Hell, why don't you figure out a heist, you're a smart guy?"

Jack smiled and shook his head. But he was. Jack was a smart guy. He had gone to college for a year. Not that that makes a guy smart, but he was going to be an engineer. He had an engineer's mind too, always enjoyed figuring things out. He always wanted to know *why*, not just *how*, something was done the way it was.

The summer after his first year of school he took a roofing job for the three month break. He was a fast learner and made good money and decided to stick with it for a year, planned to go back to school after he saved a little something for himself. Then the boom hit the east coast and they were putting up more houses and condos and office buildings than they knew what to do with. The money was flowing back then. Those were fat times. It would have been tough for a guy to pass up the big checks to go to school.

Still hanging from the porch, Jack looked up at the floor above us and rolled his head, as if he was working a kink out of his neck. With one quick jerk he yanked himself up off our porch, his knees pausing momentarily level with my eyes. His legs kicked out sideways twice, as he reached from the

porch floor up to the railing, and then his body disappeared altogether. He thudded hard as he rolled over the railing and landed on the upstairs porch.

I stood up and watched him through the spaces between the two-by-eight planks. "Jack?"

He didn't answer. I heard the door slide open to the room above me and Jack was gone.

In the kitchen, Emily and Darlene sat at the table. I didn't say anything to Emily, figuring what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. Jack could come down the way he went up when the mood suited him and Emily would be none the wiser. I decided to check the chicken. A cloud of smoke escaped from the grill. It was burnt.

"Where's Jack?" Emily said from behind me, startling me.

"I...the chicken's burnt." I pointed to it.

She stepped onto the porch, swivelling her head from side to side. "He's not inside, where is he?"

"He went up."

"That son of a bitch." Emily walked quickly out of the efficiency unit.

"What's going on?" Darlene said and tagged along behind her. The door slammed shut behind them both.

I turned off the grill and Jack swung down onto the porch. "Jesus Jack, what're you doing?"

"To the Bat Cave." Jack slid back over the railing. He grabbed low on the vertical railing posts and swung down to the porch below us, pretty gracefully too. You wouldn't catch me doing that. He was just asking to break a leg and if he broke something on vacation he couldn't collect workmen's comp. But it wouldn't have done any good for me to tell him that.

Through the spaces in the deck I saw Jack open the sliding door and go inside the downstairs unit.

Emily and Darlene returned to our room. "Where is he Charlie? Did he come back down here?" Emily said.

I shook my head. I didn't belong in the middle of anything going on between Jack and Emily.

"Fuck you Jack," Emily screamed, then threw up her arms. Softly, she said, "I don't know what to do."

"Well I know what not to do," Darlene said, "and we're not going to wait around here until Jack decides to grow up." Emily nodded in agreement. "Pack a bag, I'm taking you home," Darlene said. Emily took a suitcase out of the closet and filled it with clothes from the dresser drawers.

"You can come with us or stay here," Darlene said to me. It wasn't much of a choice. Either go home and listen to them talk all night about what Emily needed to do to get her life on track, mainly, dump Jack. Or stay here and hope that Jack returned.

"I'll stay. I'll give you a call tomorrow if Jack can't bring me home."

"That's fine." Darlene kissed me lightly on the cheek and then left with Emily. I couldn't remember how many times this was now, how many times in the past year Emily had left Jack. It seemed like she spent every other weekend on our sofa, saying how she had left Jack for good this time and then come Monday morning was right back with him.

I thought about going downstairs to try and find Jack but didn't. It wasn't like he was lost at sea or anything. In fact, a hotel was probably one of the safest places for a guy to be when he was drunk and wearing a tux. Jack would come back when he felt like it.

I put the burnt chicken on a platter and brought it into the kitchen. It wasn't so bad. I scraped a spot clear of the black carbon and sliced out a few pieces. After adding some pie to my plate I turned on the TV and sat on the bed. The Red Sox were playing the Angels on the West Coast. The Sox were down by a run.

I knew I had dozed off because the game was over when Jack came back. He had his arm draped over the shoulder of some woman and she had her arm around his waist. They were both laughing. The woman broke free from Jack and came over to the bed. She wasn't bad looking.

"You should have seen him Charlie," she said. I must have given her a funny look because Jack said, "don't worry Charlie, I've told her all about you. Her name's Joanne."

"Hi Charlie, I'm Joanne. You should have seen Jack. Me and Sally..." Joanne said and turned around. Another woman, obviously Sally, was standing in the kitchen. I hadn't seen her come in. She wasn't very pretty. Not a woman you'd notice.

"...me and Sally were watching TV when Jack, we didn't know his name was Jack then of course, comes into our room wearing a tuxedo. He just appeared out of nowhere. One minute he wasn't there and poof, the next minute he was," Joanne said. Then she spread her legs and lifted her arms up so her elbows were parallel to the floor, like she was getting into a karate stance. "So what does he do?" Joanne asked.

I shook my head.

She raised one arm and hid the lower half of her face behind it, her nose buried in the inside crook of her elbow, and then swung her arm wildly

to the left, exposing her face. "He goes like that and says, 'I'm Batman'." Joanne laughed loudly. "Do you believe that? Batman. Out of nowhere."

Jack smiled. It was a satisfied smile, like he was proud of having come up with something like that right on the spot.

"Come on over here Sally," Joanne said and sat on the bed. Jack grabbed some glasses in the kitchen. Sally came over carrying a bottle. I hadn't noticed that either. She had droopy eyes and a thin, down-turned mouth.

"Ready to do a little celebrating?" Jack said and handed me a glass.

"Sure, any special occasion?"

"Nope."

Sally filled my glass.

"Thanks," I told her. She didn't smile.

Joanne turned to me and said, "Batman, can you imagine that?"

We had finished Sally's vodka and Jack's rum and were working our way through the beer. Me and Joanne were sitting on the bed, with our backs against the headboard, and Jack and Sally were in chairs. Joanne and Jack had become progressively friendlier throughout the night. His chair was pulled up close to Joanne's side of the bed and he had his legs stretched out, resting them on top of her lower thighs.

"Come on Jack, tell us, why the tux? We all want to know," Joanne said and turned to me and Sally, nodding at us to encourage our support. I shrugged. Sally was even less committal, she simply stared at Joanne and sipped her beer.

Jack sat slouched in the chair, shaking his head. He still had those sunglasses on.

"You can tell us," Joanne said.

Jack didn't respond.

"Don't make us force a confession from you," Joanne said, letting her voice rise light-heartedly toward the end of the sentence while she playfully pinched Jack's leg, as if she was only joking about wanting to know why he was wearing that tux.

"Change of pace, that's all," Jack said.

"Change of pace?" Joanne said.

"Wanted to do something different. To see what it felt like to be different for a couple of days," he said.

"Oh, I see," Joanne said. But I didn't think she did. I sure as hell didn't. Jack was at that stage in the night where even he didn't know what he was saying. It was getting late.

"Excuse me," Sally said and went into the bathroom. She closed the door.

Without missing a beat, Joanne turned to me, "My friend's feeling a little sad tonight."

"That's too bad."

"I know, but maybe you could help her. You see, she's upset because she never meets anyone but I always do. It makes me feel kind of guilty."

I nodded. But I wasn't too keen about Joanne pawing Sally off on me so she could be alone with Jack, which was where she was heading with that kind of talk.

"And me and Jack were going to take a walk on the beach so maybe you could help Sally, you know, be nice to her, make her feel special so she won't be so lonely," she said and then patted Jack's legs. To Jack, she said, "What do you say, time to take a walk and get some air?"

"Sure enough." He and Joanne got up and quickly left. The toilet flushed and Sally came out of the bathroom.

"Where is everyone?" she said.

"They went for a walk."

"Oh great. That's just typical." Sally sat heavily on the bed. "This always happens, not the part about someone climbing over the porch and into our room, the other part."

"I understand."

"What's wrong with me? Am I ugly?"

She wasn't ugly, but she wasn't pretty either. Sally stared at me through glassy eyes. You'd think if Joanne was always bolting on her like this she would have gotten used to it by now. "No, you're not ugly," I said.

"You're just saying that to be nice."

"I wouldn't do that."

"Then what is it?" Sally stood up. She pinched a strand of her shoulder length hair and looked at it. "Is it my hair? My girlfriends are always telling me to do something with my hair. They say..."

"It's not your hair."

"Is it the way I dress? Do you like the way I dress?" She ran her fingers along the cuff of her short sleeve blouse. "I know Joanne always wears halter tops, and they look great on her, but they wouldn't do..."



"It's not the way you dress." Christ. If she wanted to go to bed we could have done that. Sex was no big deal, a natural body function no different than taking a leak. But she wasn't thinking along those lines, you could tell by the water building up in her eyes. She was ready to burst. Sitting down in one of the chairs, she breathed deeply, holding onto each breath for a moment like she was getting ready to dive under water.

She held up her hand, facing her palm towards me. "I know we don't even know one another, and I shouldn't be acting this way, I never act this way," she said and placed her hand on her chest, "but you don't understand how many times Joanne has...how many times I've wondered..." She shook her head and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. She looked up at me and almost smiled. Maybe she was going to pull through after all.

"Could we talk? I'd just like to talk," she said.

That did it. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. I had had enough of playing Barney the self-esteem builder and stood up. "You'll have to go, my wife wouldn't appreciate me being in a situation like this," I lied. I walked into the bathroom and closed the door before Sally had a chance to get out of her chair.

What did she expect from me? If she had wanted to go to bed, fine, that was easy. If she had bundled up all her problems, her hair, her clothes, her loneliness, whatever, I would have put that bundle on my shoulder and carried it up a three story ladder, walked it across the roof and placed it at the peak where it would never bother her again. That, I could have done for her. I would have done that.

The door to the room clicked shut.

I looked into the mirror and thought about catching up with Sally and bringing her back. What the hell, we could talk. I could tell her that there was nothing wrong with her. That she was a decent person just having a bad run of luck and everything would turn around for her one of these days. I was sure of it. I would insist that she wasn't ugly because she wasn't--she was actually sort of good looking now that I thought about it--and I'd explain that it wasn't her, that it was all those people, them, who had the problem, us.

I could still reach her before she got to her room. I put the toilet cover down and took a seat. Who was I kidding? I could have talked to her all night long and when I was done she would still have to go home alone and deal with it on her own. I couldn't deal with it for her. Nobody could.

And after I had spent all night talking and listening and trying to console, then what would happen to me tomorrow? Was I going to start caring for every poor slob whose life wasn't turning up roses? Was I going to start flipping quarters to the bums on the street? Writing letters to my Senator to save some spotted, speckled, fucking sea shell? Not on your life.

A crack of sun was shining between the curtains the next morning when the knocking on the door woke me up. Jack stirred in the bed beside me. He had returned last night after finishing with Joanne.

The knocking continued and Jack went to the door. He was still wearing that tux but his sunglasses were gone. I got up and searched for the curtain's draw-string, wanting to let in some light.

Jack opened the door.

"Good morning," Joanne said cheerfully.

"What the hell do you want?" he said in a deep and raspy, morning-after-night-spent-drinking voice. This wasn't going to be pretty.

"You told me to wake you so we could go to brunch," she said.

I was surprised Joanne had believed anything Jack said last night. From the way she operated it was clear she knew better. I found the draw-string and pulled down, opening the curtains. I had to turn away, protecting my still sleepy eyes from the morning light.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Jack said.

Joanne glanced down at her shoes and then off to the side, uncertain of what to do.

"Go on, get out of here," he said.

She hesitated, turned and left. Jack slammed the door and stood unsteadily in the kitchen.

"What the hell are you looking at?" he said to me.

"Nothing." What was there to say?

"If you got something on your mind let's hear it."

I waited for my eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight and looked outside. Off to the south I could see a fisherman standing on the rocky beach. He had a ten or twelve foot surf rod and was tying a plug to the end of his line. "The stripers are running. Are we going to do some fishing today or what?"

Jack ran his hand through his hair. "Sounds like a plan. Let me change." He walked over to the dresser and opened the top drawer.

### LUNCH AT MILARDO'S

In the sloping backyard of a brick apartment building, Lisa pushed a wheelbarrow across the damp morning grass while Stanley pruned a rose bush. His shears moved swiftly through the tangled branches, clearing away the dead, brown wood and overlapping canes. Cutting at a 45 degree angle down and away from the outside leaf buds, he sliced low on the once tall bush and quickly reduced it to a handful of foot high stubs.

Stanley straightened his bent frame and rubbed his lower back. On any other day he would have spared his back by kneeling while he pruned. But the job went quicker if he stood and he was working as fast as possible this morning. He wanted to complete the day's assignments--pruning and mulching the rose bushes and planting the pear trees--and still be able to take an hour for lunch. At noon, Stanley planned to take Lisa to lunch at Milardo's, where he was going to ask her to go out with him to a movie, or dinner, or something; he hadn't yet decided exactly which.

"It's like Marx said, philosophers only interpret the world, the point is to change it," Lisa said. She carefully spread a shovelful of steaming, rust colored mulch over the dirt in the rose bed. She was thin, like piano wire,

and had wide, expectant eyes. "If we're not trying to improve the human condition, what are we here for? What's the purpose of it all? Simple survival?"

"I don't know," Stanley said. He reached between the bush and the building--twelve rose bushes had been planted in a row against the building, six on each side of a concrete patio--and he picked up the prunings. Marx. Engels. Engels and Marx and Trotsky. Stanley didn't know anything about them beyond Lisa's daily references; he had never read any of the socialist writers. He preferred science fiction and fantasy, Robert E. Howard and Douglas Adams in particular. Stanley had, however, taken one of Marx's books out of the library with the hope that by reading it he'd have something to say to Lisa. But the dense, pointless prose had forced him to give up on the book after the first few pages.

"Do people think that capitalism is the best and final solution?" Lisa said. "That after only 220 years we've settled on the economic system that will last until the end of the world?"

Stanley shook his head and watched Lisa level out the mulch with the straight edge of an iron rake. She wore loose fitting sweatpants and a baggy sweater over her turtleneck but Stanley remembered the summer, when she had worn tank-tops that exposed her prominent collar bone and barely concealed the points of her small breasts. He thought she was beautiful; in a sleek, curveless sort of way.

Lisa finished with the rake and pushed the wheelbarrow around the corner of the building, heading toward the driveway where the three yards of mulch had been dumped.

Stanley knew that socialism was unrealistic, at best, and according to the evening news had failed or was failing in every country foolish enough to try it. But that didn't matter to him. He simply enjoyed listening to Lisa talk and he would respond with tacit agreement, to almost anything she said, in an effort to keep her talking. He didn't care *what* she talked about, it was the *way* she spoke: with compassion and conviction, as if everything was important and anything was possible. Her voice was a comfort; it filled the silence in Stanley's days, offering passion and belief yet asking for nothing in return. All Stanley had to do was listen.

Stanley looked over the slanting backyard at the four stakes marking the locations for the pear trees. It wouldn't take long to prune and mulch the eleven remaining rose bushes. Planting the pear trees, however, would take some time; the soil was too rocky for the auger and the holes had to be dug by hand. Stanley knew it would take about seven hours to finish everything, leaving just enough time for lunch.

He removed his leather pruning gloves and took off his high school jacket. Although he had graduated six years ago and the jacket--the white vinyl sleeves having long since dried out and cracked--was too warm to work in, Stanley was hesitant to replace it because the old jacket was broken-in and comfortable.

Tossing the jacket onto the patio, he put his gloves on and returned to work. His shears moved decisively through the bush without any of the tentative motions or agonizing hesitancy of those who pruned rose bushes because they enjoyed roses. Whereas Lisa would prune slowly, stepping back from the bush after every few cuts to view her handiwork and its effect,

Stanley chopped swiftly, nearly oblivious to the task he performed. He mulled over the impending lunch while he worked.

On Fridays, Stanley and Lisa took an hour for lunch instead of the normal 30 minutes. It had been Lisa's idea; she told Stanley that they deserved a long Friday lunch because they worked hard all week. He had been reluctant at first but Lisa insisted, saying they had earned it. After a few of the Friday lunches had passed without the boss discovering the practice--"and if he does, so what?" Lisa had said, "he can dock us for the measly half hour"--Stanley came to look forward to the weekly tradition.

Usually, Stanley and Lisa would go out for chinese or pizza or pad thai, it didn't matter to him. But on this particular Friday Stanley planned to take Lisa to a special place, to Milardo's, over on Roosevelt. Milardo's was a combination deli, restaurant and bocce ball retailer. Stanley ate there often and had rolled bocce balls for Mr. Milardo's team one season. Mr. Milardo had a passion for bocce; he had installed an artificial grass court on his flat roof and the walls of his restaurant were covered with signed photographs of famous Italian bocce players.

Stanley never became fond of bocce, it was downright boring as far as he was concerned, but he liked Mr. Milardo. At night at Milardo's Stanley would linger over dinner or read a book while listening to the rapid discussions between Mr. Milardo and the other Italian men. They gathered in the rear booths of the restaurant and Mr. Milardo would often describe his most recent petition of the Board of Education to include bocce in the schools. Mr. Milardo had even created bocce coloring books in an attempt to spark an interest among the younger children.

"I'm a simple man," Mr Milardo would say, "but I have a dream, to bring the boccie to the children. Is that so bad?" Stanley would shake his head and the Italian men would chuckle and wave their hands dismissively.

For today, Stanley had reserved a table by the window and had asked Mr. Milardo to make up some of his famous manicotti. Stanley wanted everything to be perfect when he asked Lisa to go out with him. He had been planning the lunch for some time now, almost from the moment Lisa had joined the landscaping crew four months ago. He had thought about calling her on the phone or asking her out at work but had decided against both options. After all, he told himself, it wouldn't be right to just ask her out while shoveling cow manure or between grunts as they ripped out a stump. Calling her on the phone wouldn't work either. Some things needed to be done right, Stanley realized, and the right way to ask a girl out was over a good meal at a nice restaurant.

Stanley finished the last bush and tied a rope around the thick bundle of prunings. Lisa walked along the rose bed checking for any uneven areas of mulch.

"It just isn't right," she said. "Our society places so little value on so many jobs. I mean, the average CEO makes 187 times what the average worker makes. What's that, like ten thousand percent more? Some ballplayer makes \$10 million a year while childcare workers make \$5.25 an hour and then we wonder why our kids aren't being treated right? What kind of person can you hire for \$5.25 an hour? That's less than \$10 thousand a year."

"It's not right," Stanley said.

"How do they expect people to live on that?" she said.



"I don't know."

"I make \$6.50 and I can barely get by. Do you know how much money I've saved during the last four months?"

Stanley shook his head.

"Forty seven dollars. And I'm not out there living high off the hog, let me tell you. We don't get paid nearly enough. We really don't." Metal banged against metal as Lisa dumped the shovel and rake into the wheelbarrow. "What we ought to do is get the other guys together and demand more money. The boss has too much work and not enough people as it is. He'd give us what we wanted if we stuck together. I know he would."

"Certainly is an idea," Stanley said

"So you'd do it?"

"Sure, why not?" Stanley considered it a no-risk commitment. Even though the boss was short-handed there wasn't any way Lisa could get the other landscapers to go out on strike. When they were all on the same site together they couldn't even agree on which station to play on the radio.

"It would require standing up to the boss. It might even mean walking off the job. It'd be confrontational, there's no way around that. Are you sure you're up for it?"

"I said I'd do it, didn't I?"

"Okay. Don't take it so personally. I'm just making sure you know what you're agreeing to."

"Of course I know what I'm agreeing to," Stanley said and paused, "although it does seem a bit unrealistic. It probably wouldn't work. And there's no point in doing something that won't work, right?"

"Of course there is. If it's the right thing to do, winning or losing doesn't matter. It's the principle."

"I...I'm taking a break," Stanley said. He stepped over the row of azalea bushes surrounding the patio and sat down on the concrete blocks, resting his back against the building. Lisa pushed the wheelbarrow out into the yard where the holes were to be dug for the pear trees.

Stanley wondered what a person did on strike. From what he had seen on the news anybody who struck got fired and he didn't want that. Not that he was particularly fond of landscaping; it was simply a way to pay the bills until he decided what he wanted to do with his life. But still, going out on strike?

Stanley wiped his bandanna across his forehead. Lisa stuck the shovel into the ground and jumped on it with both feet. Maybe he should tell her he didn't think going on strike was such a good idea. Just come right out and say it before it went any further. He knew that for some people striking and getting fired must be easy. Just as it would have been easy for some people to call Lisa on the phone and ask her out to a movie or to walk over right now and ask her out to dinner. And what about those people who proposed marriage on flashing stadium scoreboards or went on Oprah looking for dates? Who were those people? Where did they get the strength to do things like that? And, Stanley couldn't keep from thinking, why couldn't he be more like them?

His fear was absurd, he knew that, especially in comparison to the bravery he displayed nightly in his mind. Only last night he had imagined flying off to Cancun on a whim, bringing Lisa with him. They spent the week walking over endless white beaches, holding hands and talking. Stanley

bought flowers from Mexican boys and gave them to Lisa; she smiled and sat beside him in the cantina, enraptured with him and his opinions on the...

It was too ridiculous to continue. Who was he kidding? There was no reason Lisa would want to go out with him. For all she knew he was just some boring landscaper who didn't think or care about anything. True, he didn't ponder the societal issues of the day, but he too had dreams and aspirations, if only for himself and not the whole of humanity. He wanted to reach out and embrace life, he just didn't know how. But with Lisa beside him his life would be different. She could teach him. She had strength enough for them both. She...

"No no no," the boss said and snapped Stanley out of his thoughts.

Rick stood at the corner of the building, shaking his head. A recovering alcoholic, he was moody and quick tempered, prone to immediate reaction rather than careful reflection.

Stanley jumped up and moved quickly to Rick's side.

"What the hell is this?" Rick said, sweeping his arm indiscriminately in a wide arc. He had short brown hair and a full beard.

Stanley shook his head.

"Do you see this?" Rick said, again waving his arm wildly in no particular direction.

"Yes," Stanley said. But he didn't. Stanley and Lisa had done all the work in the backyard. They had installed the sod, cut down the dead apple tree and pulled out the stump, laid the patio blocks and planted the azaleas around the patio. Rick could have been gesturing at anything.

"The azaleas are all wrong. They should be evenly spaced around the patio," Rick said, drawing a crisp rectangle in the air with his index finger.

"Evenly spaced Stanley, evenly spaced. Not all...all bunched up." Rick jumbled his fingers furiously, as if removing imaginary gum from his hands.

Stanley and Lisa had planted the azaleas closer together at the corners and left the long edges more open. They had thought it looked better that way.

"That's how we drew it up on the plan, remember?" Rick said.

Stanley looked down and nodded.

"Good, then let's do it like that." Rick yanked up his wrist and looked at his watch. "I'd better get moving. I'll stop back later," he said and walked away.

Lisa held a shovelful of dirt frozen in midair. She dumped the dirt back into the hole and speared the shovel into the ground. "Why do you let him talk to you like that."

"Like what? He talks to everybody like that. That's the way he talks," Stanley said.

"That doesn't make it okay, it makes it worse. And I don't remember seeing any plan for this job."

"There wasn't any."

"Then why in the hell didn't you tell him that?" she said.

"He gets confused sometimes, you know, from being off the bottle."

"He hasn't had a drink in eight years. He's not confused, he's a jerk. Why didn't you tell him there wasn't any plan instead of letting him shoot his mouth off like he does?"

"Why bother?"

"Why bother? Why bother?" Lisa shook her head. "If you don't know why there's no point in me telling you." She grabbed her shovel and went back to work.

Looking at the azaleas, Stanley knew he would have to dig them all out and replant them to get the proper spacing. There wouldn't be time to move the bushes, plant the pear trees and go to Milardo's for lunch. He thought it over for a long moment. Reluctantly, he decided that Milardo's would have to wait.

"Maybe we should skip the long lunch, just grab something quick at 7-11 instead?"

"Whatever you think is best," Lisa said tersely, without looking up from her work.

It was settled then. They would go to Milardo's next week.

Stanley had finished moving the azaleas and worked on digging the holes for the pear trees with Lisa. The New England soil was more rock than dirt and Stanley used the pointed end of a pickaxe to remove the shale layering the side of the hole. Each hole needed to be three feet deep by three feet wide to give the tree's roots ample room.

Stanley had decided that it had worked out for the best that lunch at Milardo's was postponed until next week. There was really no rush. Next week would be here before he knew it and he'd get his chance then, a second chance. Besides, that would give him more time to figure out exactly what to say to Lisa. He could ask her out to dinner. But dinner would be too much like the lunches they shared and Stanley wanted to do something different,

something special. He could ask her out to a movie. Everybody liked movies. He wondered what kind of movies she liked.

"I've been thinking," Lisa said, "and I may have misled you earlier, when we were talking about the strike."

"I know what a strike is."

"But I didn't explain the reason behind it. Obviously, one of the reasons is money. But it's about more than money, it's about dignity and taking control of your life. And I'm not trying to romanticize a strike, I'm just using it as an example. I mean, you could go on a strike against anything. In a broader sense, a strike is just a way of refusing to accept the status quo, of saying, 'I'm not going to take it anymore. I want a change and I want it bad enough to fight for it'."

"I see," Stanley said.

Lisa laughed gently.

"What?" he said.

"You seem to see everything, don't you?"

"I..."

"Don't get me wrong, I don't mean that in a bad way. It's just that as a socialist I'm used to people disagreeing with me. Mention the word Marx and they freak-out. But the people who don't freak-out agree to some extent with what I'm saying. There are no ambivalent people when it comes to discussing Marx and socialism, I know that first hand."

"I see...I understand your point," he said.

"And you tend to agree with me."

"Yes."

"But do you agree with socialism?"

Stanley hesitated, knowing that this was an important question.

"Honestly," Lisa said and stopped digging.

Stanley thought for a moment. It had been easy to give her his tacit agreement, that hardly took any effort at all. But to blatantly lie? He didn't have the strength to do that. "Not really."

"That's okay. Most people don't," Lisa said and resumed digging.

Stanley felt better for having spoken his mind and was pleasantly surprised at Lisa's reaction. He had expected a more combative response or an attempt to change his mind, but she had accepted his opinion.

"You know," she said, "I'm sorry we didn't go to lunch today. I enjoy our lunches together."

"Me too," Stanley said, "I do too." Buoyed by the success of his previous honesty he thought about saying more but he couldn't get the words out quick enough. After a few moments had passed it became too awkward for him to raise the issue about going out to a movie. But he would definitely mention it at lunch next week, especially now that Lisa had admitted to enjoying their lunches as much as he did.

Stanley and Lisa had unloaded the pear trees from the nursery delivery truck and were now working on the last hole. Stanley stood in the hole, widening out the sides with the pickaxe while Lisa placed some of the larger rocks in the wheelbarrow. Rick walked into the backyard and stopped on the patio, scanning the new placement of the azaleas. Lisa walked quickly over to him.

"Stanley and I have been thinking," she said, "and we decided that we'd like a raise."

Stanley stopped digging and stared at Lisa. What was she doing? They hadn't decided anything.

"Can't afford it right now, maybe later," Rick said and stepped around Lisa, unclipping the tape measure from his belt as he walked toward the holes.

"If you can't afford it, Stanley and I will have to quit."

Rick stopped walking. "I'm a very busy man. I don't have time for this," he said. "But how much were you thinking?"

"A dollar an hour."

"That's ridiculous."

"That's nothing compared to what you should be paying us, and you know it."

"Well..." Rick ran his fingers over his moustache, down the sides of his mouth and under the beard on his chin. He turned to Stanley. Stanley stood motionless in the hole, staring at Lisa in wide-eyed disbelief. Rick considered Stanley for a long moment and then turned back to Lisa. "You're fired," he said to her. Lisa didn't react; she watched Stanley.

To Stanley, Rick said, "You can either keep your job at the current pay or go with her."

Stanley looked at Lisa, seeing her not as a fellow worker but as a woman. And with the prospect of her leaving creating panic and confusion within him, he could focus only on the single fact that unless he acted she would be gone. Lisa looked bigger than she was, standing on the crest of the sloping yard, above him on the patio, and Stanley tried to get up and out of that hole so he could stand beside her.

He struggled, for what seemed like forever--his knees beginning to buckle from the effort--but it was as if his feet were planted in the ground.



He envisioned her reaching down to pluck him out of the hole and then taking his hand as they walked away together. But she stayed on the patio. Why wasn't she coming down to help him?

Stanley tried, but he couldn't take that first step. The hole was too deep; the step too large. He swung the heavy pickaxe up over his head and the axe froze for the briefest of moments above him, pausing at that imperceptible point of inertia, before gravity brought the axe swiftly down.

## NIGHT AND DAY

Travis and I were standing on the front porch steps of his parents' house, shooting his shotguns off into the North Dakota night. There's nothing out here that you could hit, as long as you aim high enough so as not to shoot a cow. Travis shot one once when he was a boy. He said his old man didn't hit him or get upset or anything. Just carved that heifer up and put it in the freezer.

Most fathers would have been madder than hell I imagine. At least I know mine would have been. My father, Jonathan W. Peters, wouldn't have spoken to me for days, weeks even, had I done something like that. He was a successful man, not inclined toward compassion when it came to the mistakes, foul-ups and overall deficiencies of lesser men. My father was very particular about how things should be done, like insisting he be called Jonathan instead of Jon. He was buried yesterday in the cemetery behind St. Mary's church in Wellesley, Massachusetts. I couldn't stand the thought of listening to all those muckety mucks saying what a fine and upstanding citizen the old bastard was so I packed up and left. I came out here, to Travis's farm.

Bolstered by gallons of coffee, boxes of Suzy Q's and a brief layover outside the Twin Cities, I made it from Massachusetts to North Dakota in record time, a little over 38 hours.

Travis welcomed me enthusiastically and said, "God damn, it's good to see you, and I ain't just saying that hey." He was tall and thin as a wheat shaft and he pushed up the brim of his cap. "But what the hell you doing here?"

"Decided to take a vacation and see this farm you were always talking about."

"Never heard of anybody vacationing in the Dakotas before, but that's all right by me," Travis said with the easy acceptance of someone who wasn't often shocked or surprised. He stared at my car, "What the hell you call this contraption?"

"A Volkswagen Jetta,"

"A Volkswagen?" Travis shook his head. "This farm's been in the family three generations and there's never been a foreign made car on it. Hell, come to think of it, there's never been nothing but Fords on the farm, and for good reason. Rather push a Ford than drive a Chevy. But seeing as how you're from the east, and don't know how the rest of the country does things, I'll make an exception this time and let you park that outfit over behind the silo, where none of the neighbors can see it."

Travis was joking, of course; the nearest neighbor was more than a mile away and the farmyard was surrounded by Travis's parents' 1,500 acres of rolling, golden prairies. The whole place had been set up in the middle of nowhere, up near the Canadian border. I would never have found it if I didn't stop by the local grain elevator. Who better to ask the whereabouts of a wheat farmer than the guys working in a grain elevator? The farmyard was just

what you'd expect: a red cow barn, silver grain silos, dusty tractors and an auger parked beside a 15 foot pile of corn cobs. In the distance, strings of orange colored buttes stood out against the light blue sky.

I was relieved that Travis was glad to see me even though I had arrived unannounced, but that's the kind of guy he is. Most people'd want you to call ahead to set a date and they'd see if they could squeeze you in over lunch. I'm sure my mom wasn't too pleased with the timing of my trip to the farm. I didn't get around to telling her I was going and I had to leave a note beside her coffee mug on the kitchen table. I know she'll forgive me though, she always has. It's just that I'd been to enough funerals to know what I wasn't missing. Even if the stiff was The Boston Strangler, after the priest's sappy eulogy and some teary-eyed and syrupy comments from one of the dead guy's old friends, you'd think Mother Teresa was getting buried instead of the SOB stretched out in the box.

But I don't want to talk about Jon. He wasn't a major influence in my life, was hardly ever around at all, so I don't see any point in discussing him. Besides, he wasn't really my father. I was adopted. My mom offered to pay to locate my biological manufacturers after seeing some typically melodramatic Oprah show about adoption, but I didn't see what good that would do. Jon was a successful man who already had three daughters and desired a son so he adopted a screaming little blob of mucus and flesh and named him Jonathan Jr. No great mystery there, successful men like Jon always get what they want.

That's me by the way, Jonathan Jr, but everybody calls me Jack. Getting back to Travis, I suppose I should begin at the beginning, at the hows and whys and wheres of my friendship with him.

I met Travis this past summer pouring concrete foundations on Nantucket island. We were taking down the forms on my first day at work and I was having a hard time banging the top clip loose with my hammer.

"Hold on squaw bait," Travis had said and walked along the top of the wall; he wore pointed cowboy boots and black jeans turned gray from cement dust. He stopped above me, knelt down, and from his better angle loosened the clip with one hit.

"Thanks."

"No problem squaw bait," he said and began to walk away. He had been calling me that all morning; I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it wasn't a complement.

"The name's Jack," I said reluctantly, not wanting a confrontation on my first day but knowing I had to address the issue or accept being called 'squaw bait.'

Travis stopped and looked at me for a long moment. "Fair enough," he said and pulled his bandanna out of his back pocket; he wiped the sweat off his face. "Where you from?"

"Wellesley. How about you?"

"North Dakota."

"Why'd you come all the way out here?"

"The laws were after me," Travis said proudly, "and Nantucket is about as far as you can get from the Dakotas without leaving the country."

I didn't want to seem naive, or that running from the police was something unfamiliar to me, so I didn't ask why the cops were after him. I gave him my best 'yeah, I know what you mean,' nod of my head and said, "I suppose it is." Travis nodded and we went back to work.

Now telling somebody that you're hiding from the police might seem like an odd thing to say right off the bat, but it was easier than what I later learned to be the truth: Travis was engaged to be married back home but was too scared to go through with it. After we had worked together for awhile and became friends Travis let the fugitive story fade away and he fed me some lines about not wanting to be tied down in a marriage. You've heard it before, the whole cliched spiel about needing to sow those wild oats. But I knew better. Travis was just plain scared; there's no shame in that but it's not something one guy tells another guy.

As for myself, I had been recuperating at our vacation home in Siasconset after a strenuous freshman year at college; I had flunked out and the effort nearly exhausted me. You have to work pretty hard to flunk out of college. It was an average school, notable to Jon only in the fact that it was located outside of Cambridge. Jon had attended Harvard but he never called it that; it was always *Cambridge*. Had he gone to Yale he would have said New Haven. The fact that I attended Ithaca College, a small school in upstate New York in the same town as Cornell, did give my father some solace. He could say, without lying, that his son was in Ithaca and his friends would nod approvingly, assuming incorrectly that Jon meant Cornell. I don't know what he said after I flunked out.

Following one too many of Jon's snide comments attacking my character and ability to work, I took the job pouring foundations with Watson Concrete. It was the beginning of the summer and my family had just moved into our summer home on Nantucket for our traditional three month stay. It was a nice house, if you're into the PBS painter's version of America. It had the requisite gray clapboard and sat on a bluff overlooking Siasconset beach.

From a platform on top of the house you could see the cranberries floating in the bog to the west and the Senkate Light House to the north and of course, as much beach and ocean as you could stomach. In the old days the wives of whalers used the platform--a Widow's Walk--to keep an eye out for their husbands returning home from sea. In more recent days my father brought his guests up there so they could all 'ooh' and 'ahh' over his view. Nantucket's got so many postcard scenic views that it gets to wearing on a guy.

Anyway, I had been minding my own business, sitting on the Widow's Walk reading a magazine when Jon came up. He was broad shouldered with thick arms and a large paunch; his physique hewn by four weekly workouts at the gym and nightly workouts over extravagant dinners. The obvious contradiction in his lifestyle never seemed to bother him. He stood at the railing for awhile, looking out over the ocean.

He turned to me and finally said, "Reading a magazine?"

Obviously, I thought. "Yeah," I said. I heard my mother coming up the stairs; she made a point to never leave me and Jon alone.

"Here you are," she said, "I was wondering where everybody was." She handed Jon a glass of iced tea and sat in a lounge chair. "What a day. It's going to be a beautiful summer."

Jon nodded. "So," he said to me, "what are you going to do this summer?"

I shrugged.

"There's plenty of jobs on the island," he said.

I didn't respond.

"Well?"

"Well what?" I said, even though I knew what he was getting at.

"Well how about getting one? It's not against the law to work you know."

"Oh Jon, he's got his whole life to work. What's the rush?" my mother said.

"There's no rush Adrian. He's nineteen years old and hasn't worked a day in his life."

I started to head downstairs. It was a calculated gamble: I would either succeed and avoid an argument or I would worsen the situation considerably. I guess I didn't much care one way or the other.

"Where in the hell do you think you're going? We're having a discussion here."

I stopped and folded my arms across my chest.

"If you're not going to school you're going to get a job."

"He's going to school next semester," my mother said, "I've already called for the applications."

"Exactly. *You've* called for them. I want him to do something for once. Christ, when I was his age I was working two jobs during the summer, never mind one."

"Times have changed," my mother said.

"They certainly have, and not for the better. This new generation doesn't know how easy they have it." Now there was an original thought. I'd only heard that one about a hundred different times from a hundred different people. Jon was warming up to one of his frequent renditions about how tough life was in the old days.



"What's next?" I said, unable to stop myself, "are you going to tell me how you had to walk 50 miles a day to school through a raging snowstorm?" Jon's eyes widened and my mother popped out of her chair.

"Look at that," she said, pointing to a sailboat out on the ocean. "What a lovely spinnaker."

The conversation went down-hill from there, as you can imagine; the long and short of it was that I said fine, I don't need any handouts from you and I'll get a god damned job. I figured concrete work was the toughest job on the island so that's what I did. It didn't take long before my fingertips and forearms were rubbed raw from the concrete and I had to wear plastic gloves in the shower to keep my hands from burning. And I must have lost fifteen pounds after nearly sweating to death every day, humping 90 pound foundation forms around in the middle of summer. Jon had said I wouldn't last a week at that job. I kept it for the entire summer.

Slinging mud, that's what Travis called concrete work, was quite a change from lounging around the house, but the days went pretty fast with all the stories Travis told about life in the midwest. They were grand narratives that usually began with the early morning milking and feeding, moved on to a long day spent combining, a few beers after work and then late-night treks to Bismarck or Fargo or the reservation towns to drink whiskey, play blackjack and sleep with beautiful women. As my body sweated under the Nantucket sun my mind imagined cowboys standing along wooden bars in darkened saloons drinking shots from bottles without any labels. Beside them stood willing Indian women, reminiscent of childhood pictures of Pocohontas.

Travis's stories contained more sexual conquests, car chases, fist fights and consumed bottles of booze than were humanly possible, but their setting

captivated me. The other guys on the crew got tired of Travis's stories because the stories would change, growing larger and wilder with each retelling. Travis tended to exaggerate, but that didn't bother me, everyone I had ever met took some poetic license when relaying a story. And why not? The truth gets down-right miserable sometimes.

Besides, Travis's stories weren't much different than the stories told around the frat house, only his were interesting because of their foreign location. The year I spent in college was spent as a member of Alpha Phi Epsilon. Jon was a firm believer in the networking advantages of fraternities and he had wanted me to join one, so I did. And after he cut me a check to show his appreciation I left the frat house and never went back again. I couldn't stand all those rich, young muckety mucks hoping to become older and richer muckety mucks. To get into the frat I had to submit copies of Jon's quarterly tax statements and a picture of myself. Once they saw Jon's tax return I'm sure my picture didn't matter.

Travis and I spent a lot of time together on Nantucket. His apartment was only a block from the boss's garage and I'd often stop by after work. He'd cook us steaks and fries and we'd eat, drink beer and talk.

"Them coyotes'll yell all night long," Travis told me one night. We were sitting on his sofa watching TV and I grabbed a handful of chips from the family-sized bag resting between us. "Most times they ain't no trouble but when they get hungry they get brave and then they'll slink on down by the livestock. Three or four of them can cut down a heifer in half a heartbeat. So on Sundays we go hunting. Used to be you'd get 25 bucks for a coyote. Not no more though, there's too many of them. Now we just hunt them to protect the cattle. And for fun too I s'pose."

Travis pulled a can of Copenhagen out of his shirt pocket and tapped it against his palm, packing the snuff. "Time for an after-dinner mint," he said and pinched out a wedge and placed it between his lower lip and gum. He put the can away and wiped the black flecks off his fingers. That Travis dipped before dinner, and all day long, didn't lessen his relish for that 'after dinner mint' phrase. I'd have a chew on occasion, and it took about two minutes for it to turn my stomach, but it seemed like Travis was always working on a dip.

Walking down Main Street by Murray's Toggery Shop one day, Travis spat off to the side and nearly clipped some old lady. The old bird scrunched up her leathery face, which she was trying to hide under one of those fashionably popular Nantucket Red caps, and told Travis how disgusting that was. But tobacco spit isn't anything compared to tobacco smoke. If some guy's spitting into a bottle at the other side of the bar it doesn't bother me. If he's smoking a cigarette, I practically have to smoke it with him. And it's even worse if the guy's smoking a cigar.

Jon smoked cigars. Big fat Havana maduros called Les Hoyos Des Dieux. They were the only kind he'd smoke. He smoked the first cigar of each day right before breakfast with a short glass of Bordeaux. (He never drank Port until after dinner). The first cigar of the morning tasted the best, he said, because his palate had not yet been muddled by the day's other flavors. Right. Jon always talked about cigars with that phony reverential affection, trying to convince himself, and others, that he really did smoke them for the taste and not the nicotine.

Maybe by spending ten bucks for a cigar Jon really did convince himself that he liked their taste. All I know is that if I ate anchovy paste spread over a stale hot dog bun every day of my life, and told myself every day how

wonderful it tasted, maybe I could convince myself that I liked it. But I'd never lean back in my leather bound chair and hold my anchovy paste covered hot dog bun aloft, gazing at it like it was the Mona Lisa or something, and exclaim, no, *proclaim*, that there's nothing in the world like a fine anchovy covered hot dog bun.

I know, I know, who cares about cigars? I certainly don't. But it's illegal to bring Cuban cigars into the US as I'm sure you know. Not that that ever stopped Jon. He would bring boxes of the cigars back home with him from his trips abroad or have friends overseas mail him his favorite contraband. Jon would open each new box and repeat Kipling's wornout phrase how 'a woman is just a woman but a good cigar is a smoke.' He really beat that phrase to death

Like I said, Travis and I spent a lot of time together on Nantucket. One day we knocked off early from work on account of rain. Seeing how we had the better part of the day in front of us, and nothing better to do, Travis bought a pint of Black Velvet and a case of beer and we went back to his apartment. By lunch-time we had finished off the beer and Travis was half way through the bottle--I couldn't stomach the stuff--and he was saying how he wished he could go home, right now, to be with his Martha.

Even though he had never said so before I always knew he missed her. For all Travis's talk about sleeping around he was never once unfaithful to Martha while he was on Nantucket. And there was plenty of opportunity for him with all the college women from Wellesley and Smith and Swarthmore running around the island in neon swimwear.

I forget who's idea it was initially but we came up with the plan of driving one of Watson's company trucks back to North Dakota so Travis could get married. The plan was that I would drop Travis off, stay and visit for a few days and then return to Nantucket. At the time we didn't consider taking the truck to be stealing since I'd be returning it. We told each other that it was nothing more than a loan, that we were only borrowing the truck. Needless to say, we weren't engaged in a whole lot of rational thought that afternoon and getting my Jetta from my house in Wellesley never occurred to me.

So we got in the half-ton and drove down to the ferry dock--we had taken the ferry to the Cape to pick up materials a couple of times before so there wasn't any problem with that--and parked in the lot before buying our tickets. We were both pretty worn out by that point and we decided we'd better take a nap to sober up a bit, before arousing any suspicions by stumbling into the ticket office. As you can probably imagine, our nap lasted longer than anticipated and when we woke up three hours later the idea of driving to North Dakota didn't hold the same appeal. Back at the apartment, Travis kept saying how we should have done it, that he didn't care about stealing a truck or going to jail, all he cared about was marrying his Martha. One week later I gave him fifty bucks for a bus ride home.

Now putting aside how it would have been wrong for us to have stolen that truck--which is all it would have been, stealing, I'm big enough to admit that--there's something to be said for a man willing to steal a truck so he can get married. It says something about the depth of a man's affection to risk jail for the sake of love.

Jon wouldn't have done anything like that, although he wasn't averse to sneaking out of the house at night and on weekends to visit his girlfriends. Jon was a director of this big shot Boston financial firm and he sat on the boards of numerous other companies so he always had an excuse to be out at night. On weekends he had to meet with shareholders or visit a promising new company half-way across the country. Or so he said. Whether my mom knew which meetings of Jon's were with a bunch of old men in blue suits and red ties or with the brunette at 212 Pleasant Street in Chestnut Hill I don't know. But my sisters and I knew and one night, I was sixteen at the time, I decided to do something about it. I followed Jon from our house in Wellesley to the brunette's apartment and slashed the rear tires on his Audi.

Stuff like that doesn't happen too often in Chestnut Hill, it's a pretty exclusive neighborhood, and when Jon came home and asked me where I had been that night I knew he knew I did it. He might even have seen me running away after the car alarm went off. But I just lied and told him I was at my friend's house. There wasn't anything Jon could say to that. It was the perfect crime, what could he say: I saw you running away from my girlfriend's apartment? I mean really, what could he say? How do you justify something like that? What makes a guy think that he can have it both ways, every way, that he can have everything?

But I suppose that's a rhetorical question; it was always clear that Jon thought he deserved everything he got in life. Whatever happened to come his way was due him. If Jon had won a million dollar lottery he would have said how hard he had worked to win that lottery; how he had earned that money and how everybody who didn't win the lottery didn't deserve to win because they were slackers or didn't work hard enough or weren't smart enough to

have won. Jon's girlfriends were the well deserved rewards from a successful life; like a ten dollar cigar or a sixty dollar bottle of booze; like merit badges that he could pin on his shirt. Here's a red one for first aid, a yellow one for canoeing and a big fat gold one for lying and cheating and treating my mom like dirt.

Anyhow, Travis was glad to see me when I got to the farm and he took time off from his work to show me around. The first thing we did was go coyote hunting in his Ford. Travis drove and talked and spat and drank beer as I shot his shotgun out the passenger's side window at nothing in particular. We didn't see any coyotes, not that I could have hit one anyway with Travis barrelling that truck over the flat Dakota plains, bouncing through knee high prairie grass at fifty miles an hour. I asked him if it was legal to hunt from a truck and he said, "this ain't the east hey, you can piss where you stand or shoot from a truck. We do things different out here." No sir, it wasn't the east at all and we could do as we pleased without anybody telling us otherwise.

Travis filled me in on all the pertinent farm information as I kept my eyes peeled for coyotes. He told me why a Case International was better than a John Deere and what times of year they did the planting and sowing and how you could tell harvested wheat ends from combined corn stalks. Travis never once spoke about sports or portfolios or politics or fellow alumni who'd been promoted to positions of power; all those topics Jon pontificated on ad nauseam.

Like I said, Travis and I were standing on the front porch steps of his parents' farm, shooting his shotguns off into the North Dakota night. Tonight's been pretty much like my previous two nights here on the farm. Travis switched from beer to Black Velvet and Mountain Dew, whiskey-Dews

he called them, in the middle of dinner and then we went outside to use up our nightly allotment of shells. We bought the guns into the house and Travis told the family that he and I were going into town. We've gone to town the past nights to play blackjack and roll dice and drink, leaving the farm before the desert pie ever got a chance to cool.

Martha asked Travis to please stay home, just one night, and his father told him he'd god damned better be home before morning this time to get those cows milked--Travis and I had stayed out kind of late the night before--and his mother retired to her bedroom, saying how she was tired of listening to it all. I knew I wouldn't be getting any warm pie for desert and would end up eating it cold again for breakfast.

We went back outside and Travis stopped on the porch to shove a lipper of Copenhagen between his cheek and gum. He spat and said, "We're going to skip the blackjack tonight. I know a couple squaws who're always ready for a good time as long as we got money enough to buy them drinks."

I thought it over for awhile. I thought it over and said, "I'm really not feeling up to it tonight. Think I'll stay in and catch up on some sleep."

"Suit yourself, it's your loss," Travis said and gave me a long looking over. "This ain't the east hey, we do things different out here."

"Damn right," I said, "that's what I came here for."

Travis nodded and slapped me hard on the shoulder. "Don't wait up," he said and then left.

I suppose I could have gone inside to check if the pie was cool enough to eat yet. But Travis's father and Martha were in the kitchen playing cards and I didn't feel much like cards. I sat down on the porch and stared at the outlines of the jagged hills against the horizon. Off to the west, the Big



Dipper hung low over Witches Tit Butte, reaching down to ladle out its mother's milk.

It's quiet out here. More quiet than anything I've ever known. I hadn't noticed that before. Every other time I'd been out at night Travis and I were shooting guns or driving in his truck or talking; nobody could have noticed how quiet it was with all that going on. I thought about shouting, just to hear my voice fill up the emptiness, but I didn't.

## IN THE BARBER'S CHAIR

Dan Rogers, a competent looking man wearing a Brooks Brothers button down shirt and slacks--the jacket and tie having been left on a hanger in his car--lingered outside of the barbershop. He stood to the side of the partially opened door, unnoticed, and watched with interest while Jay cut a young boy's hair.

Having an appointment to get his hair cut, Dan could have watched Jay from the seat in the barbershop. That vantage point, however, didn't offer the best perspective. Dan enjoyed watching Jay work and could better appreciate the barber's skill from a distance; at an angle where Jay's body didn't block the motions of his hands.

Although a gifted craftsman, Jay's expertise was not the sole basis for Dan's appreciation. In fact, Dan's high estimation of Jay sprung more from his ability to perceive Jay's talent than from the talent itself. Dan was more observant than the average person and believed himself to be particularly adept at noticing small details. While other people saw Jay as merely a barber who provided a service, Dan was able to discern the unique skill that Jay possessed.

Dan's ever-vigilant attention to detail had led him to a manager's position in a respected accounting firm. During the tax season, which began

around January 15th, Dan worked 12 to 14 hours a day reviewing the returns of the 11 junior accountants beneath him. After spending three months focusing on 1120's, 1120-S's and 1065's, Dan's heightened sensitivity to the world around him became even more enhanced.

Just as a man on a restricted diet enjoyed a three course meal more than a glutton, once the tax season had passed Dan found great enjoyment in life's smaller pleasures; in having the time to read the morning paper or listen to the radio talk shows or loiter at the Greek deli watching the thin slices of Gyro meat being shaved from the rotating slab of beef. On this particular evening, with no pressing matters before him, Dan looked forward to a leisurely haircut from an accomplished barber.

Dan watched as Jay gently pushed the boy's right ear down to make room for the scissors. According to Jay, the shears provided a more uniform cut than the electric razor. Jay clipped along the side of the boy's head and then brushed the fallen hair from behind his ear. Dan decided to enter the barbershop, knocked lightly on the door and stepped inside.

"Hello," Dan said.

Jay turned slowly toward the door. He was built on the thin side of average and beneath his neck a triangle of flesh, not covered by his white v-neck t-shirt, showed through his transparent, plastic smock. Two wide eyes, that seemed to be perpetually staring off at some unseen horizon, punctuated a smooth and creaseless face that belied Jay's 63 years, which Dan knew to be his age because they often discussed his upcoming retirement.

"Hello Dan. I'm just finishing up with the young gentleman here," Jay said.

"Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

"Good. Then have a seat and I'll be with you in a moment."

Dan closed the door and walked over to the vinyl chair placed against the western wall. Three framed photographs of Windsor Castle hung on the wall; the pictures having been taken from a Windsor Castle souvenir book that Jay had received as a gift. Dan sat in the chair, rolled up the cuffs of his sleeves, and reacquainted himself with the familiar surroundings.

Jay's barbershop was also his home, his apartment, and although the room was small its compact size lent it a certain charm. At first, after visiting Jay on a friend's recommendation, Dan had thought it strange that a man would put a barbershop in his apartment. Over the years however, as Dan's workload at the accounting firm increased, he had come to see the benefits of Jay's situation. Dan often thought of becoming a small businessman himself, of leaving the pressures of deadlines and senior managers and mistake prone, junior accountants behind. For example: Jay liked to sleep late. Instead of being rudely awakened by an alarm clock at five a.m., Jay opened his barbershop in mid-afternoon and cut hair until nine p.m.. Although Jay didn't make the money Dan did, Dan realized that one couldn't put a price on freedom and leisure. Operating a business out of one's home had other advantages as well: low overhead, no commuting costs and in the case of Jay, who dealt mainly in cash, a certain flexibility in preparing his tax return.

Angled off to Dan's left, close enough for him to rest his feet on, was Jay's cot. A dark blanket covered a thick foam pad and was tucked crisply underneath the bottom. On top of the blanket numerous magazines, *Guns and Ammo*, *Newsweek*, *People*, lay spread out for the customers. At the foot of the bed, against the northern wall, a coffee table supported a portable black and white T.V., an alarm clock and neatly squared stacks of books. A closed

door to the right of the bookcase led to the kitchenette and bathroom. To Dan's immediate left were two sets of standing bookcases; the contents concealed by makeshift drapes fashioned from old, but clean, towels. On Dan's right, a small desk was pushed up against an eight-by-ten foot pane glass window.

The vertical blinds covering the window were half open, allowing a bright strip of sunlight to stretch across the middle of the room. Dan placed his left foot on the metal frame of Jay's cot and positioned the foot so it wouldn't touch the mattress. The polished toe of his raised penny loafer protruded into the section of sunlight and glowed brightly.

About ten feet in front of Dan, in the shaded area on the opposite side of the sun's path, was the barbershop portion of the room. A waist high stool was placed close to a full-sized barber's chair with a cranberry colored back and seat; a wide mirror, hung at eye-level, ran the length of the wall; a single shelf just below the mirror held Jay's barber's equipment and a deep sink had been installed beneath the shelf in the corner of the room. Taped to the mirror, a placard read: "For A Quality Haircut, Hair Must Be: 1. recently washed; 2. well groomed; 3. cut to customer's specifications; 4. cut within hair's normal growth pattern." Dan read the sign, as he did every time, and checked off the requirements in his head.

"As I was saying, during the seventies over a million barbers went out of business." Jay ran his tongue along the inside of his mouth and then wet his lips. Jay liked to talk while he cut hair. He talked about hair, naturally, but also about sports and politics and who was moving out of the neighborhood and how expensive everything had become; all those subjects

Dan had heard discussed in previous barbershops and in countless delis and diners.

"It was the age of the *salons*," Jay said sarcastically and slowly twirled his comb one full circle "I was a relatively new barber then. But while everyone else was going out of business, I was cutting hair right here in this shop."

The boy turned his head sideways to get a look at his haircut in the mirror. Jay waited. The boy didn't say anything.

"So how'd you do it?" Dan asked, although he had heard this story before. Dan thought that if the boy in the chair had been raised right, he would have known enough to ask. Even if the boy didn't care, it was only proper to feign interest.

Jay put his scissors and comb in the breast pocket of his plastic smock and turned to Dan. He looked directly at him but Dan got the impression that Jay wasn't seeing him. There was a blank and glassy quality to his Jay's wide eyes that made Dan wonder if Jay ever really saw the object he was looking at. Whether Jay saw him or not, Dan still held Jay's eyes with his own; it was conventional etiquette to look a speaker in his eyes and Dan had cultivated the practice in his dealings with clients and business associates.

"To stay in business I needed an angle," Jay said. "So I began cutting hair with a straight razor. 'Razor Renaissance' I called this shop. I even grew my sideburns long and waxed my mustache, I had a mustache back then."

"That must have been a trick, cutting hair with a razor."

"Oh yes, it was certainly difficult, especially with my arthritis. The motion was extremely repetitive." Jay extended the fingers of his arthritic hands. Stretching his fingers, he spread each digit away from its

neighbor and held that position for a moment. He then balled his fingers into a tight fist, paused, and relaxed his hands. Jay took a straight razor off the shelf, pulled the blade out of the handle and stood behind the boy.

"It went something like this," Jay said, turning his head over his shoulder to speak to Dan.

Dan leaned to the side of his chair in an attempt to get a better view, even though he had seen this demonstration many times.

Jay drew up a patch of hair with the comb and, holding the handle of the razor between his thumb and forefinger while his other fingers hung loosely, he slid the razor back and forth in short, choppy motions. He whittled the patch of hair down until it was flush with the comb. Jay closed the straight razor and placed it back on the shelf.

"That's something. It sure seems like a roundabout way of cutting hair though," Dan said.

"Yes, it was tedious. But the people liked it. I had more customers than I knew what to do with."

The young boy cleared his throat. Jay removed his shears from his breast pocket and returned to work. He snipped carefully around the boy's cowlick, stepped back to watch how the cowlick would lay, saw that it laid down nicely, then continued. Jay's hands moved slowly, but delicately, over the boy's head. What he lacked in speed he more than made up for in precision.

Watching Jay work, Dan calculated that he had his hair cut approximately ten times a year--excluding special occasions. Over the course of a lifetime that added up to a lot of haircuts, more than enough for Dan to consider himself an expert on the subject. And Jay was, unquestionably, the

best barber he had ever seen. Jay didn't take a lot of customers anymore, which was his prerogative, and he spent nearly forty-five minutes on each person. Other barbers could knock out a haircut in fifteen minutes, but they only cut hair to make a living. To Jay, cutting hair seemed to be more of an art than a livelihood.

Jay stopped cutting and took a deep breath. "We're almost through now," he said to the boy. Jay sat heavily on his stool and grabbed his electric razor and a small can of lubricating oil from the shelf; he stopped two or three times during a haircut to lubricate his razor or soak the comb in the pale blue disinfectant solution.

"I applied for an apartment in the subsidized complex over on 16th," Jay said, dropping some oil onto the razor blades. He turned on the razor to work the oil into the blades and a thin mist of oil spread out from the blurry blades; the tiny drops flashing brightly in the patch of sun that had moved closer toward Jay.

"That's a nice building. But I thought you wanted to stay in the neighborhood, to be close to the FoodMart and drugstore?" Dan said.

"Yes, I would, but there's 27 people on the waiting list for the building on Lincoln. And they only turn over about six units a year. I'd like to move out in two years, when I'm 65."

"The building on 16th is newer, isn't it?"

"I believe so." Jay turned off the razor.

"The rooms might be bigger. If they were big enough, you could keep cutting hair in the kitchen or someplace."



"Oh, I don't know. Since the apartment wouldn't really be mine, it's the government's, I couldn't remodel it. I wouldn't have the right sink. I certainly couldn't put my chair in there. It just wouldn't be right."

The boy cleared his throat. Jay placed his hands on his thighs, leveraging his upper body against his legs, and slowly pushed himself into a standing position. He resumed cutting the boy's hair.

"My daughter called me last night," Jay said.

"I don't know if I remember you having mentioned a daughter before."

"Probably not. We aren't on the best of terms and I haven't spoken to her in quite a while, until just last night. She adopted a baby girl. I guess she's been trying to do that for some time now. I told her I didn't want the child calling me 'granddad.' I don't know why, but I've never liked that name. 'Grandfather' seems more appropriate." Jay ran his tongue along the inside of his mouth and then wet his lips. "My daughter didn't know what to call me herself, come to think of it. I told her she could call me anything she liked, it didn't matter to me."

Dan went back in his memory, trying to decide for certain if Jay had ever mentioned his daughter before. Given all their discussions it seemed odd that he hadn't. However, Dan realized that he didn't know the family situations of many of his junior accountants either; in today's busy world it was difficult enough to get to know an individual person, never mind his entire family history.

"Well," Dan said, trying to be helpful, "maybe she should call you 'father.' That way there'd be some consistency in wanting your grandchild to call you 'grandfather.' Consistency's important with kids."

"That's a very good point. I hadn't thought about that. Thank-you."

Dan nodded gently, feeling pleased with himself. Jay took a ruler off the shelf and placed it on the boy's head. Lifting a few strands of hair Jay measured the top of the head, then both sides and finally the bangs. "The bangs and top are fine, but I need to take a little more off the sides. We usually leave a half inch on the sides, don't we?"

The boy nodded. Jay put down the ruler and picked up the shears and began cutting. "Thinking of my daughter made me think of my ex-wife. And thinking about my ex made me think about my one true love, who never became my wife. I hadn't thought about her for years."

Dan recalled the ex-wife having been referred to before, in passing and without affection, but never the other woman.

"She was beautiful," Jay said. "We were quite serious for a while and we discussed marriage. But she was a Mormon and I was a Protestant. She said that religion didn't matter, that we could work through our differences. But I've never agreed with the Mormons and I told her that. I told her I didn't think we could work through it. So she left." Jay lifted his hands away from the boy's head and held them aloft for a few moments. He attempted to lower his hands again to resume working but pulled them away and rested his arms at his sides. Jay looked at himself in the mirror but Dan didn't know if that was the person he saw.

"After she left I couldn't work, or eat, or sleep. I didn't leave the house for six months because I didn't have the energy. Her leaving took all the energy out of me. I eventually did start working again, but for two years I could only manage it part time because I didn't have the strength for any more. I've never been the same since."

The boy cleared his throat again but Jay ignored him. Jay turned to Dan and stood in the bright swath of sun. The sun pressed against Jay, laying a yellow sheen over his smooth, pale countenance and catching the many folds in the transparent smock. The smock shimmered and seemed to be melting.

"Do you think I made too much out of her religion?"

Dan didn't know what to say. He diverted his eyes from Jay's and looked over Jay's head into the mirror. The three framed photographs on the wall behind Dan were reflected in the mirror just above Jay's head. Dan had always liked those pictures. He had gone to Windsor Castle as a young man studying abroad and the pictures brought back pleasant memories. He had never considered it before but he imagined, for the first time, that Jay might have liked to have visited Windsor Castle instead of admiring it from three glossy pictures torn from a souvenir book.

"I guess I'll never know," Jay said and turned back to the boy's hair.

Dan removed his foot from Jay's bed. After all, it was Jay's bed, not a stool, regardless of how Dan might position his foot so as to avoid the mattress. Dan stood up. "I'm going to have to pass on the haircut," he said.

"I'm almost through here, won't be more than a few minutes."

"That's all right...I...I have a meeting that I forgot about," Dan lied. "I can't believe I forgot it, I'm usually pretty good about those things." Dan took out his wallet and removed a ten dollar bill. He placed the bill on the desk beside him.

"You don't..." Jay said.

Interrupting him, Dan said, "No really, take it. You could have scheduled someone else for this time-slot. It's the least I can do."

"Well, if you insist."

"It's the least I can do Thanks."

"No need to thank me, I didn't do anything."

"Just the same," Dan said and hurried out of the barbershop.

## DIRT AND DUST

If Ronny was here we'd be down at the Blue Moon Tavern, shooting pool, half-way through our second pitcher of beer by now. Since it's Tuesday night, the night the Blue Moon lets local jewelry makers sell their wares inside the bar, Ronny'd be haggling over a crystal necklace or rope bracelet or something he wanted to get for Maria.

But Ronny's not here so I'm just sitting on the front porch steps of my boarding house, killing time, staring out into the midnight shadows of "the jungle." That's what Afid calls our front yard--the jungle. And he's not far off. The grass hasn't been cut in months and the flowerless rose bushes have overtaken the porch. A rusted lawn mower is parked against the foundation; it's been there as long as I've been here--six months.

Ronny was here too, up until three days ago when he stole my truck and took off for California with Maria. I can just see him. He's got Maria pulled up tight beside him; his arm draped over her shoulder. I bet they even did the tourist thing, stopping at the parking areas along route one in Oregon to look at the lighthouses. Ronny would have been scanning the horizon in search of whales.

In high school, Ronny and I went on whale watching trips with Mr. Edward's biology class. We'd share a pint of Tango on the bumpy bus ride from school to the ferry while Ronny recited from *Moby Dick*. He'd stand on the green vinyl seat, pressing one hand against the ceiling for balance, and read: "But oh! shipmates! on the starboard hand of every woe, there is sure delight." The other kids shook their heads and Mr. Edwards pretended not to notice; he left Ronny alone in exchange for Ronny's promise to stop initiating the "wave" in class. Edwards would turn to write something on the blackboard and Ronny would spring from his desk in the front of the room--where Edwards had placed him to keep a better eye on him--throw his hands up over his head and yell, "Go team." The rest of the class followed in unison. They didn't share Ronny's appreciation for *Moby Dick* but they weren't averse to giving Mr. Edwards a ballpark cheer every now and again.

Once aboard the ferry Ronny pulled his binoculars and raincoat out of his backpack and rushed to the bow of the boat. The ferry was a small, single level job with maximum occupancy of about 40 people and as it headed out into the ocean the waves broke over the gunwales. The rest of the class looked out through the windows from underneath the covered section of the deck, not looking for whales, but watching Ronny. Like a crazy Ahab, Ronny stood defiantly at the bow with his feet spread wide for support, his binoculars focused on the horizon and the ocean spray spilling off his yellow slicker.

The door behind me opens and the light from inside the house flashes over my head. The smell of onions cooking comes and goes. That'd be Afid. He's fasting for Ramadan and can't eat during the day so he feasts all night

long. A stocky guy in blue chinos and a blue shirt comes down the steps and walks past me. I don't recognize him, but the turnover in this house is so high that new faces are always popping up and disappearing. He stops and turns around.

"Spare a cigarette?" he says, staring at the one in my hand.

I hand him the pack. "Sure, take two," I say, trying to be neighborly. He nods and taps two dirty fingers on the bottom of the pack, shooting out the cigarettes. He puts one in his mouth and one behind his ear.

"You new here?" I ask.

"Just moved in today. Room number five," he says and lights the cigarette. That's Ronny's old room. He was behind with his rent so right after he left, Ping, the house manager, threw Ronny's stuff in a bag and hung out the 'Room Available' sign.

"I'm Mike," I say and extend my hand.

"Ted," he says and shakes my hand. His hand is rough and callused. "You follow politics at all?" he asks.

"Occasionally."

"Well," Ted says and sits down beside me on the steps. He darts a quick glance over his shoulder into the house. "Then I bet you didn't know Clinton was a Jew and that Washington's under Zionist occupation?" he whispers.

"I thought I saw him quoting the New Testament on T.V the other day, that'd make him a Christian, wouldn't it?"

"There's no fucking Christians. They're all Jews. Catholic Jews, Protestant Jews, Baptist Jews. All Jews," Ted says.

"Oh, now I see," which I do, but which isn't the way Ted takes it.

"Right. Let me show you something, you'll appreciate this." Ted pulls a folded piece of paper and pen out of his pocket. He writes on the paper, spelling the word 'Jesus' as 'J--es--us.'

"Jesus was a Jew," he says.

"You got me there."

Ted looks at me sternly. "You'd better take this seriously. I'm trying to help you out here. You're one of us and you need to know these things." He puts an 'e' and a 'w' below the 'J.' Vertically, it spells 'Jew.' He pulls down the 'es' and writes 'ad' in front of it. Don't ask me where the 'ad' came from.

"That's AIDS," Ted says and pokes at the paper with his pen to prove his point. "The nigger plague. And it's going to destroy Spain, England, the South East and the United States. Did you know that?"

"No."

Ted nods slowly, as if he expected as much. "Of course not," he says. "Because nobody wants you to know it. Those bastard teachers don't want you to know the truth. Can't trust them. The media neither. They got their own liberal agenda." He stands up.

"You hang on to this," Ted says and hands me his diagram. "Lucky for you I moved in here. We'll talk more later." Ted gives a quick jerk of his head and walks away.

I stub out my cigarette. It's bad enough Ronny stole my truck and left me stranded here, but to have to put up with a gabby-mouthed white supremacist is more punishment than I deserve. Granted, I deserve much of what I've gotten and I'll accept the responsibility for that. It's my own fault



for letting Ronny talk me into coming to Seattle. I should have known better. Ronny's been talking me into things and getting me in trouble all my life.

The first time I can recall was when Ronny and I were sent home from the fourth grade for sneaking into the school. We should have been outside for recess but Ronny wanted to put the dead snake we had found on our teacher's desk. And we got caught. It wasn't so much this single act that got us sent home as the long line of transgressions that had preceded it. But we had finally crossed the line, our principal, Mrs. McGarrah, told us and called our moms. I remember she took me aside, bent her hulking frame over me and said I shouldn't be hanging around with "that crowd," meaning Ronny, and that I needed to be more of a leader, less of a follower; that I needed to think for myself. She was right. I should have listened to her.

My entire childhood with Ronny was more of the same. He lived down the street from me and if he wasn't talking me into playing "war" with live ammo, our B.B guns, he was convincing me to be his lookout man when he stole candy from the drugstore. Ronny formed the "Easy Riders" gang in fifth grade after seeing the movie on the late show. We were never much of a gang though; there was only the two of us in it. The worst thing we did was to ride our bicycles so far away from home that we got too tired to pedal back and had to call my older sister to come get us.

In the sixth grade Ronny made one of his great discoveries--booze. We were walking around the neighborhood on Halloween, too old now as members of junior high to have bothered dressing up, when Ronny pulled the water bottle he normally kept on his bike out of his jacket. It was filled with a dark, green liquid that looked like stagnant pond water.

"What's that?" I said.

"My own special brew," Ronny said and squirted some into his mouth. I could smell it and knew what it was. He winced and shook his head. "Goddamn that's good. Hit's the spot," Ronny said and smacked his lips. I knew it wasn't good and that there was no spot for it to hit, Ronny was just talking like he had heard the people on TV talk.

"Where'd you get that?" I said.

"From the liquor cabinet over the sink."

"What's in it?"

"A little bit of everything. The Mint Cream stuff is what gives it its color though," Ronny said and held up the bottle, admiring his concoction. "Want some?"

"Sure," I said. Not accepting the bottle never crossed my mind. I sucked on the nipple of the bottle and squeezed a taste into my mouth. It was awful.

"What do you think?" Ronny asked.

"Good. Kind of strong though, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's probably the 'Jack,' Jack Daniels in case you don't know. That stuff's pretty strong. Usually, you'd want to mix it with cola. But I didn't want to waste any space in my bottle on soda."

Laughing, three college women walk down the sidewalk. I light another cigarette and check my watch; it's just past midnight. Fraternity Row is one block east and University Avenue is two blocks west so there's always an odd assortment of guys in Izod shirts and gals with sweaters hanging to their knees and young skateboarders with orange hair and homeless people walking up and down the sidewalk. Occasionally, we'll find a homeless person sleeping

on our porch; our boarding house being only a few degrees removed from a shelter.

The three women get into a Honda Accord parked on the street. I think about going into the house to visit Sherry but she's doing homework and isn't expecting me until 12:15 or 12:30. That's when I usually get home from my second shift job as an alarm dispatcher. Two new people were being trained tonight so I got to knock off early. I watch the Honda pull away as I tap the ashes from my cigarette.

I remember being 16 as a junior in high school, that's four years ago now. Ronny and I were in my mom's Reliant K-car two weeks after I had gotten my license. It was December vacation and we were heading to a matinee movie, driving along a four lane road known as Meeker Way, when we passed the Bag Lady walking along the slushy sidewalk in the opposite direction. She was a local character who spent her days walking around town carrying an over-sized canvas bag. Rumor had it she lived in a cave.

"There she goes. Damn, she must be in good shape. I wonder how many miles a day she walks," Ronny said.

"Couldn't tell you."

"Hell, spin this boat around, I'm going to ask her."

"What?"

"Turn around and get me alongside her, I'm going to ask her how many miles a day she walks."

"She isn't go to tell you ."

Sure she will. I'll sweet-talk it out of her. You watch. Now turn us around before she gets away." The turn-off for Burke Street passed by and there wasn't another one for over a mile.

"Hang on then," I said and cranked the wheel hard to the left before checking my rear or sideview mirrors. The passing Honda Accord's right front fender hit the K-car's left front tire and both cars spun 360 degrees, collided again near the yellow median strip, ricocheted off the guard rail on the opposite side of the road and eventually drifted to a stop.

The front nose of the K-car was bent into an L-shape and all the glass had shattered on impact. I opened my door and put a shaky leg on the ground. Ronny grabbed my shoulder and stopped me.

"Hold on a god damn minute," he said.

"I have to check if he, she's..." I said and pointed to the other car. The driver of the Accord wasn't moving.

"They're not going anywhere," Ronny said and tightened his grip on my shoulder.

"Jesus Christ Ronny, they could be dying or something."

"And what are you, a doctor? What are you going to do?"

I tried to pull away from Ronny but he wouldn't let go of my shoulder.

"When the cops come, say we were making a right hand turn on Burke, we spun out on the slush and got thrown back into traffic," Ronny said.

"That's fucked, nobody will believe that."

"Look, Mike, listen to me. They don't have to believe it, you just tell them that. Got it?"

"Fine, whatever, now let me go," I said and Ronny did.

The young woman rested her head on the steering wheel. I stared at her, unable to do anything. She lifted her head and looked at me; she wasn't hurt. "What happened?" she said.

I hesitated and recalled what Ronny had said. "I must have spun out on the slush."

When the police arrived, they questioned me and Ronny several times about the slush excuse and shook their heads while taking the pictures and measurements. But the judge accepted it, whether he believed it or not. I got seven points on my license and an admonition to drive more carefully instead of being arrested for reckless driving and having my license revoked. Ronny had been right; he always was. He had a knack for finding trouble but he always knew what to do in a tight spot; he was gifted, pure and simple. Even if I didn't understand why at the moment, whenever Ronny said, "Look, Mike, listen to me," I knew I'd better listen to him.

I get up and head into the boarding house. Rooms numbered four and five are on my left off the main foyer. There's nothing in the foyer except a card table, where the phone rests and the mail gets placed. I pass the wide staircase that goes upstairs and the doorway that leads downstairs and enter the kitchen. I know Afid was just here because he's the only one who turns off the kitchen light when he's done. More than anybody else, even the owner, this is Afid's house. He's been here five years, which is practically an eternity in a dive like this.

There's a note taped over the grease splattered stove that says, "You are appreciated for keeping the stove clean." That's Ping's work, but most everybody ignores him and his notes. The white paint is peeling off the cabinets and the three refrigerators have padlocks. Whether the locks are locked shut depends on how much food is getting stolen. It's been pretty good

lately so the locks are left open. The toilet flushes in the bathroom beside the kitchen and Alex steps out. "Hello," he says slowly.

"How's it going?" I say.

Alex smiles. He's around 26 and commanded 11 tanks and 36 men as an officer in the Soviet Army. He's been in the States a couple of months, working under the table at a bamboo furniture maker for \$7 an hour. "I weell soon be reech," he says and places his hand on my shoulder.

"Rich, ich, ich," I say. Alex watches my mouth closely. He wants me to correct his English--he didn't speak any at all when he got here--so he can become rich.

"Rich," Alex says slowly.

"That's it. I'd like to chat, but I've got to see Sherry."

He nods. I'm not sure if Alex understands 'chat,' but he understands Sherry and smiles broadly. "Yes, Sherry," he says.

I walk down the hall. Light seeps out from under Sherry's door but I stay outside for a moment, listening to hear if she's still awake. She falls asleep reading sometimes and leaves the light on. She's a sophomore at the University and the only woman in the house. This isn't the kind of place that attracts many women. I knock on the door.

"Come in," Sherry says. She's sitting cross-legged on the bed, reading, with her head resting against a Van Gogh poster on the wall. The painting's a landscape and Sherry's blond hair, pale face and long neck are framed by the dark greens and blues of the field in the foreground. She's wearing a black sweater and black tights, her usual. It seems to be the style, but the tights also conceal the burn marks on her legs. She was in a car accident as a kid and her

legs were burned from mid-thigh down. But the burns aren't as bad as Sherry thinks.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not belittling her burns, they're certainly visible, but if she wasn't wearing dark tights you still wouldn't notice the scars. There's too much else to look at; she's that pretty. I expect to see her on the cover of magazine or walking down a model's runway, not in this house. I'm surprised every time I look and still find her here.

"Well?" she says.

I can't think of anything to say so I yank up my wrist and look at my watch. "What time is it?" I say.

She laughs. "I'm not sure, but it's certainly not dinner time."

I sit next to her on the bed. "How about dessert, you could serve dessert couldn't you?"

"Stop it," she says and closes her book. Sherry told me two weeks ago that if I wanted to enter the promised land I'd have to stand the test of time. The thought of it overwhelms me and I've been making a joke out of it ever since.

I look around her room. It's as much out of place as she is; it looks normal. There are art prints and posters of the popular Seattle bands on her walls; colorful throw rugs cover the ugly, rust colored carpet; fake fishing nets with seashells attached hang from the ceiling, hiding the yellow water stains.

"We could take off our clothes and lie down together," I say.

"Now there's a bright idea."

"We wouldn't have to do anything, we could just lay here."

"What's the point?" she says.

"Does there have to be a point? Does everything have to have a purpose? I don't see..."

"Okay Mike," she sighs. She leans over and whispers softly in my ear. "But if you want me, you'll have to take me." I start to feel warm, soaking up her words like a shot of good rum. She places her hand on my crotch. "I want to feel you inside me," she whispers and eases her tongue in my ear, sending that shot of rum a 5,000 watt electrical chaser. I jump up from the bed. Sherry rolls over on her side, laughing.

"That's not funny," I say.

"Oh relax," she manages to get out between laughs.

"There's some things you just don't joke about."

She becomes serious for a moment. "Who says I was joking?"

I hold that thought until she starts to laugh again.

"Forget it," I say and leave the room.

"Wait, don't go," Sherry says and follows me through the kitchen.

"Can't you take a joke?"

I climb the stairs and don't answer. At the top of the landing I head left toward Afid's room. Sherry stands at the bottom of the stairs. "You're a god damn baby," she shouts and I enter Afid's smoke-thick room and close his door behind me.

Afid's kneeling on the carpet in front of an open newspaper heaped with melon rinds. The color of his brown polyester pants matches that of the carpet and I can't tell where his legs end and the floor begins. Next to the newspaper is an ashtray and a plate with the greasy remnants of that chopped meat and onion dish he's always eating.



"You and Sherry, no?" Afid says, focusing his attention on the piece of melon he's paring from the rind with his small, delicate hands. Afid must be middle-aged or better, but I've never asked and he's never told me, because he has gray streaks running through his black hair; they give him a distinguished look and go well with his classic features.

"Sherry yes, me *and* Sherry no," I say. I walk the ten feet or so across the room and stand with my back to the wide window looking out over the street. The window is open a few inches--it only opens a few inches because the wood around the window is warped and binds against the frame--to let the smoke out.

Afid nods and leans over the newspaper, biting from the piece of green melon stuck on the knife. The juice runs down the knife and splatters on the paper.

"Fucking Ronny. I was happy in Massachusetts. I don't know why I let him talk me into coming here."

Afid swallows the piece of melon and picks up his cigarette. "Seattle is much better than the east. I've been to New York," he says and shakes his head.

"What's wrong with the east coast?" I say.

"The weather. Rents. Danger. New York is more dangerous than Seattle. Seattle is much better than any other place for many reasons." Afid stabs the knife into the last piece of melon and offers it to me.

"No thanks. Massachusetts is different than New York you know."

Afid thrusts the knife at me. "Have some. It's good."

"I'm not hungry, really."

"Fine," Afid says and eats the melon. When he finishes chewing, he asks, "Why is Massachusetts better than Seattle?"

"Well...I don't know, it just is. I know more people there, my family's there."

"You have people in this house. People on the street. Why do you want people?"

"Okay, fuck the people. But my family's still there."

"Fuck this, fuck that, why must you fuck everything?"

"Fuck you Afid," I joke and sit on the window ledge.

"See, now you want to fuck me. It's not right man." Afid smiles and wipes the knife on the newspaper. "All your family is in Massachusetts?"

"That's right."

"Have I ever heard you call them?"

I have to think for a moment. "No," I say, although I have called them from work once or twice. We've never had a whole lot to talk about.

Afid nods. "I didn't think so." He dumps the cigarette butts onto the rinds and rolls everything up in the newspaper. He stands, holding the wet newspaper in one hand and the dirty plate in the other. "I will remove these." He slides his stockinged feet into the slippers he keeps by the door and leaves. I run my hand over my earlobe; I can still feel Sherry's tongue probing my ear.

It seems that every time I think about Sherry these days I wind up thinking about Laura, a woman I used to know back home. It makes some sense, seeing that Sherry's giving me the run around about sex and Laura slept with me the first night we went out. But thinking about Laura makes me think about Ronny, a transition that gives me some cause for concern. There's a

definite connection between Ronny and Laura though; he helped me get over her.

Laura was the manager of the Subway I worked at in high school. One night after we closed at ten, and her live-in boyfriend had called and told her not to hurry home--he was drinking beers and watching the game with the boys--Laura and I went out to a bar, got drunk and had sex in the front seat of my truck. The same truck Ronny's in right now. But after spending the previous three hours drinking I kept having to go to the bathroom so I'd have to excuse myself, jog a respectable distance from the truck, do my thing, jog back and pick up where we had left off. Naturally, the end result of such a romantic interlude was that I fell hopelessly in love with Laura.

"You're going to what?" Ronny had said after I told him my plan the next day.

"I'm going to ask her to marry me," I said.

"You've got to be fucking kidding."

"I'm not."

"Christ. You can't possibly be this stupid."

"I can't help it, I really like her. And she likes me. We've got along great all year. And now this happened, last night."

"And now this," Ronny said and shook his head. "Let me try and explain this to you. Just because a woman lets you fuck her doesn't mean she wants to spend the rest of her life with you. Just because you get along really great with someone *and* she lets you fuck her doesn't mean she wants to marry you. In fact, considering the fact that you were in a god damned truck in the parking lot behind the god damned K-Mart when she did let..."

"It's more than that. We worked together, we slept together, she likes me."

"Look, Mike, listen to me. She didn't fuck you, she fucked her boyfriend. Got it?" I hadn't considered that possibility before but after thinking about it for a moment I knew Ronny was right; he always was.

"You've never slept with anybody before, have you?" Ronny said. I didn't answer, because I hadn't.

"All right, drastic times call for drastic measures. Meet me at your house in two hours."

"What's up?"

"The only thing to do when you fall off a bike is to get back on."

Being a novice in these things, I was unprepared to handle the emotions that insisted on following my first sexual experience. I over-reacted. I know that now. I didn't then. But Ronny was there for me and two hours later was at my house with a case of Colt-45 kingers and a sure-fire plan to break me out of my funk.

During the drive to Montreal, where Ronny was going to buy me a prostitute, a clean and legal one, he convinced me that proposing to Laura wasn't such a good idea. By the time we entered Vermont on the return trip, after six hours spent at the LeFleur street bars and both of us running out of money before we bought the hooker--she refused to accept Ronny's credit card--we were stopping at practically every rest area. Ronny's Ford Escort wasn't happy. He'd turn off the ignition switch, remove the key, and the engine would continue to run. When the Escort blew a rod less than 24 hours after we had landed back in Chelmsford, Ronny claimed we had been divinely blessed and that the gods had smiled upon us. Ronny's faith in numerous, and

actively engaged, deities was only part of his less than mainstream belief system.

Ronny believed that the meaning of life was encoded in the pattern of the stars and he'd sleep on his roof at night trying to decipher the message hidden in the sky. He said he could hear the grass grow, and that it screamed when he cut it. Since every living thing had feelings, he would pour a quart of beer over his lawn before cutting it, attempting to deaden the nerve endings in the grass to make their death as painless as possible. Of course, what's good for the grass is good for the grass-cutter and Ronny would pour a quart or two inside himself as well. Needless to say, his yard always looked like hell.

"Why do you say that?" Afid says, slides his slippers off and closes the door behind him.

"Say what?"

"Not accept the melon?"

"I wasn't hungry."

"Hungry. Not hungry. It's not about being hungry. I offer, you accept," Afid says.

"Sorry. Christ. Next time I'll eat the fucking melon."

Afid sits down and rubs his hand over his face. His palm scratches against his two day beard. "I apologize. It is not about melon."

Afid lights a cigarette and inhales strongly, holding the smoke deep in his lungs for a moment, then exhales. Some days when I look at Afid he looks like the leading man in an Arabian adventure. On other days he just looks like another guy living in a boarding house. Before I got to know him I thought he was in the States hiding from the Algerian secret police or something; that

Afid was some sort of political operative on the run. After that notion passed, and rightfully so, I thought he was having a difficult time adjusting to America but once he adjusted he would find himself a good job and move out of this house. That was before I knew he had been in the States for eight years, five in Seattle, in this house.

But even then, I kept searching for some explanation as to why Afid was living in this place and working for minimum wage as a cash register operator at the Mobil station. He had studied history at Cairo University and French literature at the Sorbonne and he was certainly qualified for something better than a register operator's position.

"I was happy today. I talked to someone intellectually and was comfortable. I went to the bank and inquired about a loan. I bought a good melon in Chinatown. But then I have to pick up garbage because people in this house don't bother to tie their bags or replace the lid on the can and it depresses me."

"I know. This place is a dump. Why don't you move out, get a nice apartment with one of your friends?" Afid had a number of Arabic friends he saw frequently.

"There'd be no privacy. I need my privacy."

"Get your own room then. You can get your own room. Hell, when Ronny gets back I can help you look for a place, help you move."

"What kind of room is there for \$175?"

"Not much I guess."

Afid nods. "Being clean is such a little thing. So easy. If they were clean, this place would be good."

"It'd take more than a cleaning to make this place good. The electrical wiring can't be up to code and the roof leaks. This house is a fire trap if there ever was. It should probably be condemned."

"No man. I have lived many places. This place is not bad. People here understand each other. They may not always like each other but they understand. Understanding is hard, cleaning easy. If they only would clean."

Unconvinced with Afid's reasoning, but tired and needing sleep, I say, "I guess I'll have to take your word on that one."

"You should."

I walk across the room and open the door. "I'll see you tomorrow." Afid nods and I go downstairs to get a drink before bed. A small person wearing a fluorescent orange hunting cap and light blue nylon jacket is looking in refrigerator number three, the refrigerator Afid and I share.

"Hey," I say.

She spins around. She has a loaf of bread and a bottle of Schnapps clutched to her chest and she looks quickly from side to side. There's only one way out and I'm blocking it; we look at each other for a few moments and then I step to the side.

"Okay. Go on," I say.

She doesn't move.

"You can keep the stuff. Just go."

She moves slowly past me, watching me warily. She stops in the foyer and turns around. She looks to be about 50 and seems even smaller than she is in the middle of the large, empty foyer. "I'm not from this place," she says.

"Obviously."

"I come from a place where the sun shines alllll day," she says and opens her arms, as if presenting the world to me; as if the world were a loaf of white bread and a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps. "I come from a place where if you want to go somewhere you just *think it*," she says, spitting the last words out. "Where there's no need for food because we don't have bodies, where people live in harmony."

"It sounds like a nice place, now you should leave." I'm not happy about letting her take the food; she might start making this a regular stop on her rounds. She puts the loaf of bread inside her jacket and grips the neck of the bottle tightly in her wrinkled and spotted left hand. She steps closer to me.

"It's hard to survive in this world when you're from that one," she says, pointing toward the ceiling. She takes another step forward and is right in front of me. The knuckles on her left hand bulge, as if she's squeezing the water out of a sponge instead of simply holding a bottle. There's a pale band of skin at the base of her ring finger. "I don't belong here. I'm a stranger here. It's very difficult for me in this world."

I nod. She looks around the foyer, turns and scurries out the door. I lock the door behind her, convinced now more than ever that coming to Seattle was a bad idea. I get a drink of water and head downstairs to my room.

It's not much of a room, the mattress and a chair and desk came with it. The only thing I've added is a set of sheets to cover the mattress stains. But it's a big room and Ronny thought I should sublet it and take another room in the house. He was convinced I could rent it for at least fifty more dollars than I paid for it. But Ronny's always working on a scam to make a buck. I turn off the light, kick off my sneakers and lie down on my bed.



Ronny's entrepreneurial forays were always profitable, and usually illegal. In junior high he'd steal porn magazines from the drugstore and sell them in school for two or three times the cover price. In high school he ran his own football pool, making up the cards himself after seeing the betting slips the local bookies sold, and he altered driver's licenses for twenty-five bucks a pop. His altered licenses were expensive but they were better than the fake college I.D's everybody was buying in the Combat Zone in Boston.

It was his last scam that brought us to Seattle. I knew I was in trouble that day when I saw Ronny jogging across the dusty concrete yard, dodging out of the way of a behind-schedule flatbed freshly loaded with blocks. I was working as a forklift operator, one of a long line of no account jobs that I had held since graduation. He stopped beside my forklift and explained the situation to me: he had almost gotten caught using stolen credit cards. He didn't do the actual stealing, another guy did--mainly from the locker room at the YMCA--but he was the one who used the cards in the stores. He was stopped in *The Image* with a card issued to a man named Fukayama. Ronny's a stocky white guy, there's nothing Asian about him.

Ronny got away before the cops arrived, but he was certain that this snafu was a bad omen; that he had used up all the luck he had been given for this life. For all of Ronny's dubious activities he had never been arrested, hadn't ever received so much as a speeding ticket. "It's time to get the hell out of Dodge," he had said. Having followed Ronny ever since the time I was old enough to follow someone I saw no reason to stop now. The next day we left.

Voices from the kitchen upstairs wake me and I look at my watch; it's 2:00 a.m. Time seems to be irrelevant in this house, there's always people

cooking and talking at all hours and light sleepers don't stay here long. One voice dominates through it's rapid fire delivery and sheer enthusiasm. It can only be Ronny.

"And so..." Ronny says and then stops, noticing that the attention of his audience, Alex, Afid and Ping, has been momentarily diverted by my entrance. Ronny turns to me.

"Hey Mike. I was just on my way to get you. I had a vision. The plan to end all scams. But for this to fly I'm going to need you as my partner. Let me finish up my story and I'll lay it out for you." Ronny turns back to face his crowd before I can interject.

"So I'd been on the road for about 14 hours by then, Maria's stretched out in her sleeping bag in the truck bed, I'm up front in the cab listening to Hank on the A.M. side of the dial, and I look in my sideview mirror. I must have looked in that mirror a million times that night, it's something you got to do when you're driving, right? But what do you think I see this time?" Ronny waits but nobody answers. "The Grim fucking Reaper is what. Jogging alongside my truck," Ronny says and swings his arm swiftly behind him.

I clear my throat loudly.

"Mike's truck, I mean Mike's truck. Sorry," Ronny says.

I watch Afid, Alex and Ping, trying to figure out if they understand the 'Grim Reaper.' I can't imagine they do, but they're listening attentively just the same.

"And he was sporting full Reaper gear, let me tell you. Hooded cape, sickle, bony fingers, the works. And I don't mind admitting that I was a little freaked out at first. I've seen a lot of shit in my day, but something like this?

No way. He was real, as real to me as you are right now. Oh sure, I knew, I knew," Ronny says and chops one hand down into the other palm, "that the Grim Reaper couldn't possibly be out on route one, keeping up with a Ford, but there he was. My mind's telling me no fucking way, but my eyes are showing me a skeleton wearing a robe running down the highway. I eventually calmed down. Hell, if the Reap wants you he's going to take you, right? But as soon as I get adjusted to this new situation, the fucker pops up sitting in the passenger's seat. Inside my god damn truck."

I clear my throat.

"Mike's truck. Mike's fucking truck." Ronny throws up his hands and shrugs his shoulders. "Anyway, he's just sitting there, not saying a word, playing it real casual-like, like this is how he normally spends his evenings. So I figure it's up to me to initiate the conversation. After all, I had about seven more hours before I reached California. It was going to be a hell of a long ride if we weren't going to be on speaking terms. So I say, 'excuse me, Mr. Reaper,' figuring I'll take the polite, respectful approach. No need to piss him off if I can help it. And he turns and looks at me, as best he could seeing how he didn't have any eyeballs, just these deep black sockets, and you know what he says?" Ronny waits, nobody answers.

"Coffee," Ronny says.

"Coffee?" I say.

"That's it. Then he disappears."

"I take it that was your vision?"

"My inspiration. I built on it from there."

I shake my head and return to my room.

A few minutes later Ronny comes in. "I know, you're mad about the truck. I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it."

"I don't know what else to say."

"That's a first."

"You would have let me take it if I asked."

"What?"

"If I had asked to borrow your truck you would have given it to me."

"So?"

"So, what you're mad about is me not *asking* to take the truck rather than the actual taking of the truck. And not asking is rude, I know that, but technically, it's not..."

"All right Ron, let's just drop it."

"I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"I said to drop it. Where's Maria, out in the truck?"

"No. She stayed in California with her family."

"You just dropped her off and came back?"

Ronny shrugs. "I spent the night. She wasn't too crazy about moving 3,000 miles to open a coffee shop," he says.

"That's your plan? To open a coffee shop?"

"Exactly. Coffee's hot these days, it can't miss. I got a spot picked out, I know what kind of music we'll play, how many tables we'll need. It's all figured out. What do you say?"

"I'm not sure that I want to go home," I say, surprised by my own words.

"What do you mean? This plan is a winner, maybe my best one yet, not to mention it's legal, a definite plus. This will work, trust me," he says.

I don't know how prudent it is to start a business based on a suggestion from the Grim Reaper, but I do trust Ronny; I'm just not sure about leaving. "I don't know."

"Sure you do. You don't want to stay here. Not in this fucking dive. Hell, the only thing holding this place together is the dirt and dust; it's a miracle it hasn't collapsed already. Look, Mike, listen to me..." Ronny says and then stops, leaving me waiting for the reason as to why I should return to Chelmsford, wanting to be convinced to go back home because I'm not sure why I want to stay here.

Ronny stares at me for a long moment. "Fuck it. It's your call," he says.

"What?"

Ronny smiles, knowing as well as I do that this is a first.

"It's your decision. You know I'd want you there as my partner, that's a given, but maybe you should stay."

"Really? Do you think so?"

Ronny nods and sits on the corner of my desk.

"Why?"

"Why not? This isn't such a bad place. As good as any I suppose."

"It really isn't that bad, is it?" It really isn't, come to think of it. Oh sure, it doesn't look like much, it looks like hell when you get right down to it, but it's livable. And who knows how many yahoos like Ted will show up, and how long they'll stay, but for every Ted there's an Alex and a Sherry and an Afid.

"A guy could do worse," Ronny says, "and it'll be good for you to be on your own. A learning experience, you could call it. Besides, you can always come home. Chelmsford isn't going anywhere."

I hesitate, realizing that my decision to stay is also a decision to leave Ronny. But it's more his decision than mine; he's letting me stay, I wouldn't be able to do it without him. "That's true, I can always go home. Going home is easy, leaving's the tough part."

Ronny nods and then yawns. "I'm beat."

"You're going to have to sleep here, Ping rented out your room. I got your stuff in the closet."

"Thanks."

"I'll see if Afid has an extra blanket."

"Sounds good," Ronny says.

The steps creak underneath me as I walk cautiously up the darkened staircase, running my hand along the wall for support, heading toward the light at the top of the stairs.

## SOONER OR LATER, EVERYONE NEEDS HARDWARE

My husband sleeps with a handgun. Paul used to keep the silver plated .44 locked in its case in the cellar, taking it out only once or twice a year to go shooting at the range. Now he keeps it tucked under his pillow at night. The gun isn't loaded, of course, but its presence is a bit disconcerting. I haven't said anything because Paul needs that gun right now; it helps him deal with the nightmares he's been having since he quit his job.

In his dreams, he used to have to defend himself against the killers and creatures who chased him with guns that wouldn't work; guns whose barrels drooped or had chambers too small to hold the ammunition or shot bullets that only traveled a few feet and then fell to the ground. Now that Paul has a real gun in his hands at night the dreams are less of a problem.

My best friend Mary can't believe I'm still sleeping in the same bed as Paul, but that's the difference between me and her. She's been divorced three times. Paul and I have been married 27 years and we've both had to give-and-take. If I wanted, all I'd have to do is ask and Paul would get rid of the gun. I know he would. But it's his crutch, like the toothpicks he chewed when he stopped smoking, and for the time being he needs it.

Paul quit his job at Sears two months ago, on a Wednesday. I got home after my aerobics class at the usual time--I teach algebra at the local high school and go to the gym after work--and Paul was in the bathroom fixing the toilet. He had his arms inside the uncovered tank.

"What's happening?" I said. Wednesday's were Paul's day to work until closing and he was never home before nine-thirty.

"The damn floater's riding too high. It's wasting water by letting too much run through the bowl." Paul stared intently into the tank, focused on his task. He was thin and had thick, reddish-brown hair.

"I hadn't noticed."

Paul took his wet hands out of the tank and dried them on the towel. He flushed the toilet and watched it re-fill.

"Get off early from work?"

"You could say that." Satisfied with the new water level in the bowl, Paul replaced the tank cover. He brushed past me and walked quickly into the living room; he opened and closed the back door, repeatedly.

"What's wrong?"

"This door's never been level. It's scraping against the frame. I'm going to have to plane it down." He turned and began to leave the living room, going for his tool-box.

"No Paul, what's wrong with you?"

He stopped and shook his head, looking at the floor. "I don't know. Everything, I guess. Everything's falling apart and I don't know why. I had to quit today."

"Quit what?"



"Work. Sears. I quit my job today," Paul said and went into the kitchen. He returned with his tool-box from underneath the kitchen sink.

I sat down in the Lazy-Boy.

"They've restructured our pay scale," Paul said as he yanked out his hammer and a screwdriver. "We got word of it from Chicago this morning. It goes into effect in 30 days." He placed the head of the screwdriver on the pin and whacked the screwdriver's handle with the hammer. He continued the process, removing the three pins from the hinges.

"Could you please stop for a moment, so we could talk?" I said.

Paul didn't answer and he didn't stop working. He threw the pins in the tool-box and took out the door.

"So you just quit?"

"Christ Marge, I didn't just quit." He leaned the door against the wall. "I checked to make sure it was true. And it is. They're knocking me down, knocking all the sales staff down, to three percent commission and minimum wage. That's almost half my annual salary."

Silently, I added up the numbers. From \$13 an hour to \$4.25 was nearly 75%, putting his new annual wages at around \$8,200. Six percent commission to three percent, multiplied by his average annual sales of about \$400,000 left him with a yearly commission around \$12,500. Add 8.2 and 12.5, plus another couple of thousand for overtime. "That's more than 50 percent. Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"But why?"

"That's what I'd like to know. They said they needed to be more competitive, more profitable, but they've got enough money to own H and R

Block and Discover Financial Services and every other goddamn thing. Who in the hell knows what they're figuring."

"Can they do that? It seems a bit extreme."

"Can? They did. They didn't even have the guts to fire us outright, just dropped the pay to where a guy couldn't afford to work there anymore."

"Have you signed anything yet?" I said.

"What?"

"Did you sign anything making your quitting official? If you just left work there might be the chance..."

"What are you getting at?"

"Twenty-three thousand a year is better than nothing."

"It's not the money. I mean it is, but it's more than that. I've worked hard for them. For 29 years. I've been at Sears longer than we've been married for Christ's sake. And now this? What, 29 years doesn't count for anything? This is the way you treat someone after 29 years? I'd rather starve than work for them." Paul ran his hand through his hair.

He continued, speaking softly now, "The funny thing is, is how they're going to be more competitive by forcing all the experienced people to quit. Who's going to sell the merchandise? Some part-time kid who doesn't know a hammer from a wrench? I don't understand it, I really don't." Paul picked up the door, turned it horizontally, and carried it outside. He went around the house, heading toward the basement garage.

In my mind I went through our finances. The mortgage on our home was paid off, the kids were on their own. There was \$170 a month for two more years on the Buick, \$1,800 on our Visa card, property taxes, home and vehicle insurance...

I got up and went into my study. Pulling out the filing cabinet drawer, I removed the "Insurance" file. It was our most immediate concern.

The next morning we sat at the kitchen table.

"More coffee?" I asked Paul.

He nodded and I filled his cup. He had the morning *Telegraph* spread over the kitchen table, reading the Classifieds. Without looking up, he said, "I shouldn't have quit before talking it over with you."

"Yes, that would have been nice."

He reached out and squeezed my hand.

I nodded and ate my breakfast: one cup of cereal with half a cup of skim milk and a grapefruit--180 calories total.

Paul gulped his coffee. He drank so fast he didn't even taste it. "What time'd you get to bed last night?" he said.

"Late. I was doing some figuring."

"And?"

"Well, I called Katy, in Personnel, and she said you'd be getting two weeks severance pay for every year you worked. Did you know that?"

"Hadn't stopped to think about it."

"She didn't have the paperwork yet, but she was fairly certain that was going to be the standard buy-out package for the people with 25 years or more."

"Would I..."

"You're still entitled to it. She's expecting the forms tomorrow and will mail them out to us."

"That's good news, I guess. Did she mention if anybody..."

"Everybody was talking about you. Katy sends her best. She thinks a lot of the full timers are going to quit and take the buy-out. She also said Sears will pay for your insurance for another 30 days. By then I'll be able to get you on my policy."

Paul nodded.

"We can take the severance pay in cash or have it deposited directly into a retirement fund. Since your profit sharing is mostly in stock we can either leave it be or cash it in. I think we can only cash out a certain percentage a year though, Katy wasn't sure, so I'll have to check on that."

"Everything sounds just...peachy," Paul said.

I ignored his sarcasm. "It's not as bad as it could be. We have no mortgage payments and hardly any credit card debt and no kids to support. We've been able to save some money over the years and you'll be getting your severance pay. We were lucky."

"I don't think getting up and going to work every morning for 29 years has anything to do with luck."

"Maybe not," I said and worked a wedge out of the grapefruit. "I came across the deed to our house last night. Do you remember what we paid for it?"

"Of course. \$13,500. You were pregnant with John, not working, and I was still in appliance repair. Our parents thought we were crazy, buying a house that soon."

"Our parents thought we were crazy to get married in the first place. Your father didn't want you marrying a polack and mine thought I was marrying down. He'd sent me to college to find a doctor or a lawyer."

"I guess you should have listened to him," Paul said.

"Stop that. You know that's not what I meant."

"Then what the hell do you mean? What's the point of all your figuring and calculating. What's the point?"

"The point is, we're going to be okay until you find another job."

"And until then you're going to support me?"

"Us Paul. Yes, I'm going to be supporting us."

Paul shook his head and turned the page of the newspaper.

It wasn't surprising that Paul began having nightmares after he quit his job; not working was a big change for him. He had spent nearly his entire life working; it was what he knew best and was most comfortable doing. At 15, he took a full-time, second shift, assembly line position. He made shoes and was paid by the piece. At 17, after graduating from high school, he went to Sears. He started in lawn mower repairs, moved up to in-store repairs of washers and dryers and refrigerators and then he became a traveling repairman. After that it was onto shoe sales, then clothing sales and finally hardware sales; where he stayed for the last 20 years. We met when I was in college and worked as a telephone operator for Sears one summer.

Paul had done well at Sears because he was intelligent and worked hard. He had believed that these attributes would be enough to secure him another job. What he hadn't planned on was the entire state, seemingly, slipping into recession at the same time he quit Sears. Trident Submarines and Pratt and Whitney Aircraft cut back; Bradlees, Caldors and JC Penneys let people go; nobody was buying new homes so nobody was building them and many construction workers were laid off. Even the insurance companies, in what was once the insurance capital of the world, made severe reductions and a

number of businesses shut down altogether, going out of business or moving to another state.

Paul looked, but he couldn't find a job. Sure, there were openings for security and prison guards and waiters and fast food workers, but nothing in retail sales or appliance repair. He spent his days making phone calls, going on interviews and working around the house. He resharpened the already sharp lawn mower blades; refinished the recently lacquered wood floor in my study and changed the oil, twice, in both our cars. At night, he relied on his gun to let him sleep. Some nights were better than others, but on the whole the gun served its purpose, even though it caused me some anxiety.

Two months after he had quit, Paul went to Sears to see his friends. He had spoken to some of them on the phone but had held off returning to the store, wanting to find a new job before going back to visit his old one. But it was now clear that finding a new job was going to take some time.

"How was everybody?" I asked as we sat down for dinner.

"They're doing okay. They're looking for other jobs but don't want to quit Sears until they get something else."

"Was there anything new out of Chicago?"

"No, just the usual local philosophizing. Mike said it was Walmart that did us in. Lenny blamed it on the Reagan 80's. But if he got a flat on the way to work he'd probably blame that on Reagan too."

"Did you see many people?"

Paul took a bite of chicken, without removing the skin, chewed and swallowed. "No, I went in before the store opened. I really didn't feel up to seeing a lot of people. Lenny said all the regulars were asking about me,

wondering if I died. A few had even been checking the obituaries," Paul said and wiped his hands on his napkin. He leaned back in his chair. "Lenny said it seemed like a million people had asked for me. I can't imagine all the people I've met over the years."

"Sooner or later, everyone needs hardware," I said.

"That's the truth. Do you remember Little Mike, the nearsighted carpenter?"

I nodded. I'd shopped and visited Paul at Sears enough times to have met most of the regulars.

"Remember how he was missing those three fingers on his left hand? He'd lost them in two different accidents with the same power saw, he wouldn't use the safety guard, probably still doesn't. And Mayor Williams? He stopped by at least once a week, couldn't keep his kids out of the screwdriver bins or off the riding mowers. Shoe-the-Bookie came around a couple times a month. He always won big on football but lost it all on the horses. Lot's of people came into that store, never mind the people that worked there. Those guys were all right. Hard workers, honest." Paul shook his head. "I must have known a thousand people."

"You still know them."

"I'll hardly ever see them."

"You can visit. Invite them over."

"It's not the same. It'll never be the same."

That night was particularly restless for Paul; he tossed and turned and talked in his sleep. He must have rolled over into me and I woke up, feeling the cold metal of the gun barrel pressing into my neck. I jumped out of bed,

literally, and went into the kitchen. Drinking a glass of water, I considered waking Paul and having him get rid of the gun right now; he would if I asked, I was sure of it. But he still needed that gun. It was helping him with his nightmares, even if it was creating them for me.

I knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep for awhile so I looked over our finances in my study, trying to occupy my mind. Paul and I had always contributed the maximum to our pension and insurance policies, bought savings bonds and put the rest of our money in the bank. That had been fine when we were both working but things were different now. Paul's parents had lived to be 88 and 80, respectively; mine passed away at 85 and 78. Paul and I could be around for another 30 years and we needed to plan for that.

Paul gently shook me awake the next morning; I had gone to sleep on the sofa.

"What are you doing out here?" he said.

I didn't see any point in mentioning the gun, Paul couldn't control where his hands went when he slept. "You were tossing and turning too much." I pushed myself up into a sitting position. "What time is it?"

"It's a little early. I got up before the alarm."

"Good. I was doing some figuring last night and we need to talk."

"What about?"

"Inflation," I said.

"Inflation?" Paul sat on the couch.

"Yes. It's been relatively low for awhile but that's no guarantee for the future."

"And?"



"And I figure we'd like about a seven to ten percent return on our savings to protect ourselves against inflation."

"Where'd you come up with that?"

"I've been reading and studying. And we can't get a good return without being more aggressive."

"Wouldn't that be risky?"

"Exactly, and that's why I wanted to talk it over with you. Mary has a financial planner and he's put her in some mutual funds that..."

"Whatever you think is best. I'll support you 100 percent."

"No. I want to talk this over so we can make a joint decision."

"But I don't know anything about mutual funds."

"Neither did I until I started studying them. I've plenty of pamphlets in..."

"Jesus Christ, as if I didn't have enough on my mind already. Now I have to worry about this stuff too?" Paul stood up.

"You have to start taking an active role in these things, they're too important."

"What the hell do you think I'm doing all day. I'm making phone calls, trying to get interviews, doing work around the house."

"You're doing a lot of moping around too. It's time to move on, to accept what kind of jobs are out there and either take one, retire, go get some training at the Community College, whatever. But decisions need to be made."

"What the hell are you talking about? I've only been out of work for two months."

"Two months can be a long time."

"Yeah, well I need more time."

"I..." I said and then stopped. "I'm going into the shower." I got up and went into the bathroom.

I skipped my aerobics class and returned home early that afternoon. Paul was sitting at the kitchen table, holding the gun. He stared at it intently, as if considering it for the first time.

"You're home early," he said.

"What are you doing?" I nearly shouted. I was shaken by the sight of Paul holding the gun during the day, contemplating what, I didn't know.

"What?"

"The gun Paul, what are you doing with the gun?"

"Nothing. I just cleaned it."

I sat down heavily in the chair across from him. I'd accepted that gun for as long I could; it had to go. We'd find more constructive ways for Paul to deal with his nightmares. "I'm sorry, but you have to get rid of that thing. It's too much, having it around like this."

"I didn't know it bothered you. You never said anything."

"I know. But it does."

Paul hesitated for a moment, then said, "Okay. I'll put it back in the basement."

"No, I can't have it in the house anymore. Can we sell it?"

"I don't..."

"Please. I'd really like to get rid of it, completely."

"If that's what you want, all right," Paul said, just like I knew he would.

"How much is it worth?"

"A couple hundred."

"Good," I said, relaxing for the first time in months. "I think we should use the money to buy a bicycle."

"A bike?"

"Yes, a two-person bike. We can both use the exercise."

"Christ Marge, aren't we a little old for a two-seater?"

"We're too old for anything but."